

Christ in Prophecy
Life in Bible Times 4: “Burial Customs”

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Opening

Dr. Reagan: What were the burial customs of the first century? And how can they help us to better understand the burial and resurrection of Jesus? For the answers to these questions we went to the Bible Times Learning Center in Israel and we also visited the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem. Stay tuned.

Program

Dr. Reagan: Greetings in the name of Jesus, our blessed hope and welcome to Christ in Prophecy. This is the fourth in a series of programs about life in Bible times. In our first program, we took a look at what it was like to live a nomadic lifestyle in the time of Abraham and even in the time of Jesus. In our second program we took a look at the Passover Meal, how it was instituted, how it was celebrated in the first century, and how it became the basis of what we call the Lord’s Supper today. Last week we studied crucifixion techniques as developed by the Romans and we saw that from start to finish the process of crucifixion was designed to be a technique of torture, as well as death. This week we are going to take a look at first century burial customs and how they relate to the burial and resurrection of Jesus. Let’s go now to the Jerusalem suburb of Ein Karem.

Dr. Reagan: Welcome back to the Bible Times Learning Center here in Ein Karem on the outskirts of Jerusalem. In this segment we’re going to take a look at burial customs during the first century at the time of Jesus and our teacher once again is going to be Annie Thrasher who is the executive director of the Learning Center. Annie, it’s all yours.

Annie Thrasher: Thank you Dr. Reagan. Here in this garden that looks so beautiful, it’s hard to imagine that this is actually a wonderful place in ancient days, chosen to be used for burial. Now, I hold here rosemary, rosemary would be planted around the burial area because it has a wonderful sweet fragrance. In this area was a quarry, as you probably

know, a burial site cannot be within a village or a city or a town. So they would go outside to the quarry areas where the stone had already been worked and there they would dig into the mountain side, into living stone, in order to create a burial for a family. Now this is the type of first century burial site that you would see for a whole family of people. You will notice that there is a modest size rolling stone and the hole which the body would be carried is also very small. Outside there are benches. Now, what does all this mean? The benches outside were used by the men. The men would come as the body was being brought and they would sing songs of praise to God, not sad songs about "Oh it's so terrible this person has died." Rather, beautiful songs of praise thanking God for the creation of the world thanking God for His provision. Thanking God for the abundance in life and thanking God for the individual who has gone into his heavenly realms. So it's not a sad time, it is a rejoicing time, but being human beings, we are going to mourn. So the men would sit out here and sing their songs and they would weep. That's why these are called weeping benches, or mourning benches. Now, you might ask, where do the women sit? Well, as usual, the women have another job. The women prepare the bodies and carry the bodies on a leader through the town or village to the burial site. Usually someone is playing a flute. A song that would be heard throughout the village to alert the village that someone has in fact died. In this culture in the first century, especially in the first century where there was such a large population in Jerusalem, people were buried as soon as possible, as soon as possible. So someone might have died that wasn't even sick in the morning and so people would hear the sound of the flute and they would drop their work and follow in the procession, to come to the burial area for the burial.

Now, the reason the women carried the body behind the flute player, was because men can't touch a dead body. If a man in this culture were to touch a dead body he would be made unclean. And if you're unclean, then you can't join the minion of men in prayer. You would have to go through a ritual of purification before joining the rest of the community. So, based on that, the women took care of the burial, because women were excused from certain duties, spiritual duties, because they had their duties at home.

So, now, imagine that the flute player is coming and the women are coming and I might also add there were women who were professional wailers, who would raise up their hands and make a large amount of noise to show how sad it was about this. Now

remember the men are praising God for the creation of life and the women are being very sad. As they approach this area then the women would be down low and they would put the body into, through this. This is five hands wide and seven hands down and as the body is brought into the tomb you can see that the posture of the women is very humble. Now the reason for this is that the greatest gift that you can give to your fellow man is to lay down your life. The second is to help in the burial, because the burial is an act that cannot be returned. If I try to bury someone, I honor them, they're not going to come back and say, "Thank you so much for burying me." Understand? So I want to give my best to honor this person who has died so in my time, someone will also honor me in that same way.

Now you'll notice this rolling stone. This is a fairly modest family. And the way you can tell is that the stone is very small. You might recall that in the story of the Gospels, the women came to prepare the body or to finish preparing the body of Jesus, and they were pondering, how are we going to move the stone? Now, two women could easily move a stone like this. But in the case of a tomb of a rich man like Joseph of Arimathea, it would have been a much more impressive burial site, a much more impressive garden and a very, very impressive large stone, indicating the wealth of the individual. So, of course when the women got there that morning the stone had been moved and they went inside, all they saw were the clothes and the angel spoke to them and said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" And they saw the grave clothes inside and they left, frightened that someone had stolen the body of their Lord and ran back to find the rest of the disciples and report to them. So, this is all I can explain from the outside, but I would like to invite you to actually go inside the tomb and see about the preparations that were done on the inside.

Here we are inside the tomb. Obviously in the first century this would have been completely covered over and the women coming in to finish preparing the body would be carrying oil lamps that would be put in the niches and the sides of the tomb. This tomb is a family tomb. So within each of these areas, you would find bone boxes of other family members. Within the bone box might be one body or two, say two brothers killed in battle. A mother and a baby, say a mother and a child that may have died in children birth, families. Now, when you hear the expression he was buried with the bones of his

father, or he was buried with the bones of his ancestors, literally it could mean that all the bones were in one box.

Now in the case of our departed here, in the cave, this poor person has been dead about a year. And how can I tell? Well, when the bodies are prepared, they're simply washed and sometimes oil is put on them that's fragrant. But more oil is put on the winding clothes. And there are two clothes, one that would go from the shoulders to the knees, wrapping around the body, and the other that would go from the neck up to the top of the head, and wound around. On these clothes, special herbs were put on. Again, this is not to preserve the body, because the idea is dust to dust. It is to help the odor inside the burial place in the event that someone else would die in a period of time less than a year and they would have to enter into the burial place to take that body and set it to rest. Now, the custom is, now, to set a marker at twelve months. The custom at the time of Jesus was that the body would remain at rest for a minimum of twelve months, and at twelve months the women would come in, unwrap the body, because the flesh is gone, and all that would remain would be the bones. Then they would take the bones, never breaking the bones, take the bones and set them into the bone box, close it up and then inscribe who is the person who has died there. If you had one body for every bone box in this family area, you would have 42 boxes. But as I said, many times there were bones with other bones.

Now, I want to call your attention to the way this body is wrapped. When the Gospels tell us that the two women went in and they found the grave clothes and they were very frightened. And they thought well, maybe someone has stolen Jesus' body. I think from that Scripture often times we think of perhaps the Shroud of Turin which is one long sheet wrapped around a body but that was not the custom in Jesus' time. If they went in and they found a body or the shape of a body, and there was nothing inside of it, not even bones. Now that is something to be impressed with. That is saying, "How could you take the body without the wrappings? How could our Lord have been stolen? What is this?" And then they were soothed by the angels' voice. Now, the other indication that this is the appropriate way of burial is in the Gospels also. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he cried out, Lazarus, come forth, and then the very next thing they said was cut him loose. And if you will notice, how could poor Lazarus have moved when his

arms were bound and his legs were bound. He had to be cut free in order to move among the living again.

The other thing that is very interesting that we have discovered about the first century is that within the bone boxes there was very often small glass vials. These came to be known as “tear bottles.” It is said in Psalms that God would collect His tears in a bottle and in the first century in the ossuaries or the bone boxes they have discovered, the inside they have found small bottles of oil. Well, they’re not oil but the archeologists think they must have been oil. But the people came to believe that women would catch their tears, their mourning tears in this bottle, and then they would set it by the deceased. Now after a year, they would take this bottle, and of course if they did in fact collect tears they had evaporated, and that bottle would go into the bone box with the bones. Now what does this tell us? It tells us that in this culture that mourning has a time. Mourning has a season, but at the end of twelve months that is the end, the absolute end of the time that a human being should mourn for another. They can miss the person, but they can no longer mourn, for if they were to mourn past that period of time, it is as if they are saying I didn’t trust God. By ending their mourning they say I don’t understand why this person was taken from us, but I trust that it is the will of God. The culture is all about entering back into life on this earth and enjoying life on this earth and praising the Creator for what He has given us. So what do we have to learn about this? We have to learn that even though Good Friday was a very dark day of death and crucifixion and mourning. Joy came on that day of resurrection and they all entered back into a new way of life.

Dr. Reagan: Our visit to the Bible Times Learning Center took place during the weekend of Easter. And we took advantage of the wonderful opportunity to attend the annual Easter service that is held at the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem. I’d like to share some of that service with you, but first, let me point out that there are two possible sites for the burial of Jesus.

The traditional one throughout the centuries is at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which today, is in the heart of the old city of Jerusalem. The other and more recently discovered site which evangelicals honor is called the Garden Tomb. It is located just outside the old city of Jerusalem on the north side across the street from the Damascus

Gate. The Garden Tomb is a large first century tomb which had a huge rolling stone. It was located in a beautiful garden. It was obviously the tomb of a very rich man. The tomb is located near a hill which has the imprint of a skull in the side of it. Many people believe this is the place the Scriptures refer to as Golgotha which is an Aramaic expression that means the place of the skull.

On the Easter Sunday morning that our video crew visited the tomb, the worship team was from King of Kings Community Church in Jerusalem and that team was positioned in front of the tomb and led the huge crowd in songs that celebrated the resurrection. The featured speaker that day at all three of the Easter services was Wayne Hilsden, pastor of the King of Kings church. He has been the pastor there for over 25 years.

Wayne Hilsden: What a beautiful morning! The pyramids, they're famous because they contain the mummified bodies of pharaohs. Westminster Abbey, famous for the bones of British notables that still lie there. Mount Herzl, here in Jerusalem, famous for the former prime ministers and great war heroes buried there. But the tomb where Jesus rested is famous because it is empty. He is not here! He is risen! We may call it the Garden Tomb but it's more like a guest room where 2,000 years ago a traveler stayed one weekend on His way back to glory.

Dr. Reagan: Several years ago my former colleague Dennis Pollock and I had the rare opportunity to film at the Garden Tomb one morning for four uninterrupted hours. I'd like to show you some of that footage now to illustrate the layout of the tomb and to explain the fulfillment of Bible prophecy at the tomb.

Dennis Pollock: First century tombs of the wealthy were shaped like this. The entrance would take you into a weeping chamber. This was often large enough to hold 20 people. Next to it was a burial chamber with three ledges for bodies. Now the entrance was sealed with a rolling stone. Here is a good example of a tomb with a rolling stone. This tomb is located about nineteen miles south west of Jerusalem. It was excavated in 1976 unfortunately it was totally destroyed by vandals in the late 1990's.

Dr. Reagan: Tombs like these were used only temporarily. By that I mean that a body would be placed in the tomb and left to decay and after it had decomposed and only the

bones were left, they would be collected and placed into an ossuary or a bone box that looked like these. This made it possible for the tomb to be used over and over again.

Dennis Pollock: The Bible tells us that Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb that was hewn out of solid rock. It also says that that tomb was sealed by a large stone that was rolled in front of the entrance.

Dr. Reagan: With this background, let's go now to a place called the Garden Tomb.

Dennis Pollock: The tomb itself is cut out of solid rock, and running along the front here is a trough to hold a rolling stone that would seal the entrance. The original rolling stone is no longer here but a smaller one is on display to give you an idea of what it looked like.

Dr. Reagan: Let's go inside.

Dennis Pollock: This is the weeping chamber for the families who would come to pray and grieve over the loss of their loved one. And this is the burial chamber, where the body would be placed.

Dr. Reagan: The door to this tomb has a very important sign on it. The sign says, "He is not here for He is risen." The Gospel of John contains a great insight about the tomb of Jesus, but it's one that you cannot understand unless you know something about the prophetic typology of the Ark of the Covenant, that mysterious sacred box that sat inside the Holy of Holies in the ancient Jewish Temple.

Dennis Pollock: The Ark was made of wood, indicating that the Messiah would be human, but it was overlaid with gold, pointing to the Messiah's divine nature. Inside the Ark were three objects. One was a pot of manna, in signifying that the Messiah would be the Savior, the bread of life. The box also contains the tablets of Moses, indicating that the Messiah would fulfill the law perfectly and the third item was Aaron's rod that budded. It was a symbol that the Messiah would rise from the dead. On top of the box was a lid called the Mercy Seat and on it was two golden angels, one at each end.

Dr. Reagan: Once a year the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat. This was a prophetic symbol that one day the Messiah would shed His blood making it possible for the grace of God to cover the law of God.

Dennis Pollock: In John chapter 20 we find these words, “But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.” Now folks, that sounds like nothing but a simple description of a woman looking into a tomb but when you know something about prophetic symbolism, the passage takes on a whole new meaning.

Dr. Reagan: You see folks, when Mary looked into the tomb she saw the prophetic fulfillment of the meaning of the Ark of the Covenant. She saw where the body of Jesus had lain, where the blood had been spilled. And she saw two angels sitting at each end of that sacred spot just like those two angels at each end of the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant.

Isn't the Word of God marvelous? It always thrills me to discover insights like the ones we just shared with you concerning what Mary saw at the tomb of Jesus and what it meant spiritually. In Hebrews 2:15 the Bible says that mankind lives in lifelong slavery to the fear of death. In other words, there is nothing people fear more than the tomb, but Jesus has overcome death. His tomb is empty. And because of His triumph over the tomb, those who put their faith in Him can also experience the same victory. 65 years after His ascension into Heaven, Jesus returned to this earth and appeared to the apostle John on the Isle of Patmos. John was so astonished that he fell at the feet of Jesus as if he were dead. Jesus put his hand on John and spoke some of the most comforting words that you can find anywhere in the Scriptures. He said, “Do not be afraid John, I am the first and the last I am the living one. I was dead and behold I am alive forever more. And I have the keys to death and Hades.” What a statement! Jesus was saying I am the beginning of history I am the end of history I am the meaning of history. I have overcome death and I have the authority to grant resurrection life to those who put their faith in me. What a wonderful promise, what a glorious hope. It's because of that hope that Christians can look death in the eye and say oh death where is your victory oh death where is your sting.

Wouldn't you like to have that confidence in the face of death? Well you can have it. It is a free gift of God's grace through faith in Jesus. I urge you to reach out in faith and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior so that you will have the hope of life ever lasting with Jesus and with God your father.

I sincerely hope this series of programs about life in Bible times has been a blessing to you. We have edited these programs together into a DVD album called *Life in Bible Times* and in a moment, our announcer will tell you how you can get a copy.

Well that's our program for this week, until next week the Lord willing, this is Dave Reagan speaking for Lamb and Lion Ministries saying, "Look up, be watchful, for our redemption is drawing near."

End of Program