

LET THE DEAD BURY THE DEAD



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Matthew 8:21, 22, “And another of His disciples said unto Him, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. But Jesus said unto him, Follow Me; and let the dead bury the dead.”

What did I bury when I buried my wife May 20, 1967? I had watched my wife, who I had only known for a very few years, slowly and painfully die of cancer. I am using the word “die” in the language of today, but not in the language of Scripture. But when my wife died of cancer it was simply the home-going of a Christian lady.

The words “death” and “funeral” and “coffins” and “paying our last respects to the departed” are all the terms that most people have for the departing of a loved one, but they are not found in Scripture. “Funeral, death, coffin and paying our last respects” have a fatal, final connotation, which is not true at all because of the cross.

What did I bury when I buried my wife? Well, it was not her. As I stood there looking over her coffin, and I gazed on her face, I was looking in the face of a person that was not the person I knew in this life. The light had gone out of her face. There was no animation, and it was visible to everyone there. Her friends, my friends, our friends, the undertakers, the organist, we all knew that that body lying there in that coffin was not Ellyn.

That was not my wife. She was not a woman any longer. That was not the face of a Christian that Christ had sought and saved. What was it that we all looked upon as we gazed into the silk-lined coffin? Well, it was only the temporary part of a tricotomous person. The believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has a body, and a soul and a spirit. And what we were looking at was the material part of Ellyn, her body.

Now, Paul in Scripture, being a tent maker by trade, called the body of a believer a tent, and he stated that this tent would be dissolved, but he also stated that there is a

building, more permanent than a tent, which could easily, and is struck, but that we have a building not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, which is our resurrection body. In other words what was lying in the coffin was the temporary shelter or house for the real person of Ellyn, her soul.

Now her particular body after years of being eaten up by cancer was not only embarrassing to her but was not too much to be desired, because we were looking at an empty shell of a person, a house which had been vacated, whereas the soul had moved on to be in the mansion which is in Heaven. But the real person was no longer there, the real person, the soul, along with the spirit left long before they placed her body in that coffin.

The funeral parlor directors make you feel that if you don't spend a lot of money on an elaborate coffin, then you didn't love your wife, and they make all their emphasis on that physical temporary tent. And give the bereaved one a guilt complex if they do not provide the best, more elaborate coffin for the deceased. Always the emphasis is on the physical, that which is visible and that which is also temporal as compared with the real emphasis, the real you, the soul, which was provided for in the cross, not in the coffin.

The real you is eternal and we all live somewhere forever, and the believer and the unbeliever both have eternal souls, and we have the freedom and the choice to make as to where we want to spend all eternity, either in the presence of the Lord, or departed from Him for all eternity.

When I looked down at that cancer ridden body, I recalled that Ellyn had told me that when she was a young girl she had accepted Jesus Christ as her personal Saviour, and so I knew that what I was looking at by her own confession was not really her, because she was absent from the body and face to face with the Lord. And I knew that I

also would be in the presence of the Lord with her when the Lord decided to take me home, and this was not paying my last respects to her. I will see her again. As I looked on that silk-laden coffin with her body in there, and the silk sort of tried to soften the reality of death, I realized what we needed was not silk, but what we all need is the Saviour.

What did I bury when I buried my wife? Well, all her suffering, all her sorrows, all her tears, well death. That is what I buried, because there is no suffering for the believer in the presence of the Lord. We only suffer in time, but no suffering in time can be compared to the glory that we have in eternity. We buried with that empty shell, greed, pain, sorrows, and tears, which are all now wiped away.

I looked and I recalled how that she told me when she was a child growing up in an orphanage in Baltimore, that one night she was laying out on the front lawn looking up into the heavens and had this strange sensation of awe, and almost fear at the same time, ran inside, and yet she could not remain inside but went out again, and was more or less compelled to lay down outside and gaze once more into the heavens. She told me that she had done this quite often until finally she asked the chaplain at the orphanage what was it that frightened her so.

He told her that she felt the existence of the Creator, and looking up into God's creation she felt an infinity with the Creator and she was a part of His creation. And he went on to tell her that the Creator was her Saviour and she needed to accept Jesus Christ as her personal Saviour, which she did, and that is one of the things I recalled as I buried my wife.

We later found out that what she had experienced was the principle that she had reached God-consciousness and then came under Gospel hearing and became a believer in Christ, and that prepared me and her for her departure.

So what did I bury when I buried my wife? Well, I buried a body in which there once was a woman, who for years had been eaten up with cancer, and the Lord in His matchless GRACE took her home to be with Him and for the past 21 years she has been in the presence of the Lord, without pain, without sorrow, without tears and without death.

In fact, it is almost blasphemous to use the term death when it comes to Christians, for Christ died, and we as believers sleep in Christ, sleeping in body, not in soul, awaiting our resurrection bodies which are actually exactly like our Lord's, the First fruits.

She is waiting for me to come to her. She can't come to me, but I can go to her and will go to her when my life is over and/or if the Rapture occurs and then we will be reunited and we will be with the Lord forever.

So what did I bury when I buried my wife? Well cancer, disease, a temporary worn out body. But Ellyn is in the presence of the Lord. And she can not suffer again. Suffering is designed only for time. There is no suffering in eternity. We bury a house, but never the real person. That is the Lord's job. **He knows exactly the right time to take each and everyone of us home.** And He took her to be with Him, but she left me her testimony and her faith and my responsibility is to perpetuate her testimony and her faith, that Jesus Christ is truly the only Saviour and there is salvation in none other, for "there is none other name under Heaven given unto men whereby we must be saved."

So the body is what we bury, but the body was not designed to last forever. And we can't see the real person, the soul. Faith is the only things that are not seen, real. The things that are seen are temporal and the things that are not seen are eternal.

Ellyn is with the Lord, the real Ellyn. We only buried a temporary body which at one time housed her soul. Now you make your own decision as to where you will spend eternity. You can spend it in the presence of the Lord, or you can spend it separated from the

Lord for all eternity. When they bury you, will the real you be in the presence of the Lord, or will your soul go in another direction?

We didn't bury Ellyn. We buried a 33-year old cancer-ridden body, and there is no tombstone where she is buried on this Earth, because she is not here at any cemetery. She is home. She was not afraid to go home, she wanted to go home. She had suffered long enough, and the Lord took her to be with Him. He said "Ellyn, you have suffered and witnessed to My GRACE long enough. You have come to a full age. Come on home."

This is not darkness, this is light.

This is not groping, it is sight.

This is not grief of having my last tear wiped away.

This is sunrise, this is the morning of my eternal day.

How did I bear this Earthlife after I came up higher,

Before I knew my soul's own desire,

Before I meet Him face to face,

The One who sought me, the One who saved me, the One who kept me by His GRACE.

Matthew 8:21, 22, "let the dead bury the dead."

The first words of these verses, "and another of His disciples," show us that the incident recorded in them is only half of the whole. The two men, whose treatment by Christ is narrated, are the antipodes of each other. The former is a type of well meaning, lightly formed, and so probably swiftly abandoned purposes. **This man is one of the people who always sees something else to be done first,** when any plain duty comes before them. Sluggish, hesitating, keenly conscious of other possibilities and demands, he needs precisely the opposite treatment from his light-hearted and light-purposed brother.

Some plants want putting into a cold house to be checked, some into a greenhouse to be forwarded. Diversity of treatment, comes from the same single purpose. And so here the spur is applied, while in the former incident it was the rein that was needed.

First I want you to see this apparently most laudable and reasonable request. "Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father." Nature says, Go, and religion enjoins it, and everything seems to say that it is the right thing for a man to do. The man was perfectly sincere in his petition, and perfectly sincere in the promise that, as soon as the funeral was over, he would come back.

He meant it, out and out. If he had not, he would have received different treatment, and if he had not, he would have ceased to be the valuable example and lesson that he is to us. So we have here a disciple quite sincere, who believes himself to have already obeyed in spirit and only to be hindered by obeying in outward act by an imperative duty that even a barbarian would know to be imperative.

And yet, **Jesus Christ read this better than he read himself.** By his answer let us see that the tone of mine into which we are all tempted to drop and which is the characteristic natural tendency of some of us, that of being hindered from doing the plain thing

that lies before us, because something else crops up. Which we also think is imperative upon us, if full of danger, and may be the cover of a great deal of self-deception, and at any rate, is not in consonance with Christ's supreme and pressing and immediate claims.

The temper which says, "Suffer me first to go and bury my father," is full of danger. First go and bury my father. One never knows that, after he has got his father buried, there will be something else turning up equally important.

There was the will to be read afterwards, and if he was, as probably he was, the eldest son, he would most likely be the executor. There would be all sorts of affairs to settle up before he might feel that it was his duty to leave everything and follow the Lord. And so it always is. "Suffer me first." And when we get to the top of the hill, there is another one beyond.

So we go on from step to step, getting ready to do the duties that we know are most imperative upon us, by sweeping preliminaries out of the way, and so we go on until our dying day, when someone else buries us.

Like some backwoodsman in the American forests who should say to himself, "Now, I will not sow a grain of wheat until I have cleared all the land that belongs to me, I will do that first and then begin to reap." He would be a great deal wiser, if he cleared and sowed a little bit first, and lived upon it, and then cleared a little bit more.

Mark the plain lesson that comes of out of this incident, that the habit, for it is a habit with some of us, of putting other pressing duties forward, before we attend to the highest claims of Christ, is full of danger, because there will be no end to them if we once admit the principle.

And this is true not only in regard to Christianity, but in regard to everything that is worth doing in this life. **Whenever some great and noble task presents itself with its solemn call for consecration, some dwarf of an apparent duty thrusts itself in between and perks up in our faces with**

its demand, "Attend to me first, and then I will let you go on to that other." But morally, this plea, however sincerely urged, is more or less unconscious self-deception. The person who says, "Suffer me first," is usually hood winking conscience, and covering over, if not a determination not to do, at least a reluctance to determine to do, the postponed duty.

And although we may think ourselves quite resolved in spirit, and only needing the fitting vacant space to show that we are ready to act, in the majority of cases the man who says, "Suffer me first" means, though he often does not know it, "I do not think I will do it, after all, even then."

Now there are a great many good people who, when urged to some of the plain duties of discipleship, such as Christian work, Christian beneficence, the consecration of themselves to the service of their Lord, have always something else very important, and of immediate, pressing urgency, that has to be done first. And then they say, something else, and something else.

So some of you go on, and will go on, unless by God's GRACE you shake off the evil habit to the end of your days, fancying yourselves disciples, and yet all the while delaying really to follow the Lord unto the close. And "All your yesterdays will be but lighting you, with unfulfilled purposes, to dusty death." "Follow Me. Well, Lord, suffer me first to bury my father."

Secondly, look at the apparently harsh and unreasonable refusal of this remarkable request. It is extremely unlike Jesus Christ in substance and in tone. It is unlike Him to put any barrier in the way of a son's yielding to the impulses of his heart attending to the last duties to his father. It is extremely unlike Him to couch His refusal in words that sound, at first hearing so harsh and contemptuous and that seem to say "Let the dead world go as it will, you never mind it. Do you not go after it at all or care about it."

But if we remember that it is Jesus Christ, who came to bring life into the dead

world, who says this, then I think, we shall understand better what He means.

"Let the dead bury the dead," refers to the physical and natural death and by the other says, the morally and spiritually dead. And that what Christ says, in the picturesque way that He so often affected in order to bring great truths home in concrete form to sluggish understandings, is in effect, no, for the men in the world that are separated from God, and so are men in their selfhood and their sin, burying other dead people is appropriate work. **But your business, is living by Me, is to carry life and let the burying alone, to be done by the dead people, that can do nothing else.** Let the dead bodies be buried by the spiritually dead.

Now the spirit of the Lord's answer may be put thus, it must always be Christ first, the living. And everyone else second. And it must therefore sometimes be Christ only, and no one else.

"Let me bury my father, and then I will come." No says Christ, **first your duty is to Me, first in order and time, because first in order of importance.** And this is His habitual tone.

"He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me," Did you ever think of what a strange claim that is for a man to make upon others? This Jesus Christ comes to you and me, and to every man and says, "I demand, and I have a right to demand, thy supreme affection and thy first obedience. All other relations are subordinate to thy relation to Me."

All other persons ought to be less dear to thee than I am. **No other duty can be so imperative as the duty of following Me.** What right has He to speak thus to us? On what does such a tremendous claim rest? Who is it that fronts humanity and says, he that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me?

He has a right to say it, because He is more than they, and has done more than they, because He is the Son of God manifest in the flesh, and because on the cross He

has died for all men. Therefore, all other claims dwindle and sink into nothingness before His. Therefore His will is supreme, and our relation to Him is the dominant fact in our whole moral and Christian character.

He must be first. Whoever comes second, and between the first and the second there is a great gulf fixed. Remember that this postponing of all other duties relationships and claims to Christ's claims and relationships and to our duties to Him, lifts them up, and does not lower them, exalts and does not degrade, the earthly affections. They are nobler and loftier, being second then when they are looked at in connection with the great white Alps that tower behind them, and all earthly loves and relationships catch a tinge of more ethereal beauty and are lifted into a loftier region when they are rigidly subordinated to our love to Him. **Being second, they are more than when they bragged that they were first.**

Again it must be Christ first, and everybody and everything besides second. Then to carry that out, it will often have to be Christ only, and no one else. There will come in every man's life the need for a sharp decision between conflicting allegiances. Life is full of harsh alternatives, and it is of no use to kick against the pricks.

The Divine order is Jesus Christ first, and all things second. But we sometimes break that order and then it comes to be, very well, then, if you cannot keep the lower in their right places, you must learn to do without them altogether, **and if you will have Him first, and them second, you must not have them at all.**

"If thine hand offend thee, put it down on the block, and take the cleaver in other hand, and off with it. It would be better for thee to go into life whole than maimed, but it is better to go into life maimed, than to go into destruction whole." The abandonment of the Father's bier is second best, but it is sometimes imperative when you find a taste, a pursuit, a study, an occupation, a recreation, coming between you and Jesus Christ, when you do not know how it is, but somehow or

other the sky that was blue a minute or two ago has a doleful veil of gray creeping all over it. Be sure that something or other which ought to be under has gotten topmost, and you will have to get rid of it in order to come right again.

If this man would certainly have come back had Jesus Christ let him go, he would have been let go, but because Jesus Christ knew that he would not come back, therefore He said, "You must deny your natural affection, because it is coming between you and Me."

So when we as Christians find our earthly duties, pursuits, occupations of any kind, affections, pure and beautiful as in themselves they may be, are hindering our following the Lord, then if they are things of which we can denude ourselves, though it be a distinct sacrifice, we are bound to do so, or else we are not loving the Lord more than all besides. **When a loved one goes home to be with the Lord, we have more time to be occupied with the Person of Jesus Christ.**

Let me remind you in the closing of the variation in this story which Luke gives us, he interprets Christ's commandment, "Follow Me," and expands it into "Preach the Gospel," which was involved in it. There are many of you who are busily engaged in legitimate occupations and devoting yourselves in various degrees to various forms of beneficences touching the secular condition of the people around us. May I hint to such, "Let the dead bury the dead," "Preach thou the Gospel." The living must go on living and giving out the living Word.

A Christian man's first business is to witness for Jesus Christ, and no amount of diligence in legitimate occupations or in work for the good of others will absolve him from the charge of having turned duties upside down, if he says, I cannot witness of Jesus Christ, for I am so busy about these other things. This command has a special application to us ministers.

There are hosts of admirable things that we are tempted to engage in nowadays. With

the enlarged opportunities that we have of influencing man, socially, politically, intellectually, and it wants rigid concentration for us to keep out of the paths which might hinder our usefulness, or at all events dissipate our strength, let us hear that ringing voice ringing always in our ears.

“Preach thou the Gospel of the Kingdom.” Let the spiritually dead bury the physi-

cally dead. Let the living, spiritually alive ones, give out the life-giving Word to those who are still alive. The living must go on living for the Lord.

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