

Hebrews 11:22

“Burying Our Dead By Faith”

February 6, 2022

Pr Josh Anderson

Epiphany Season

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Hebrews 11:22. I’m also going to read Genesis 50:22-26, as it gives the Old Testament context for Hebrews 11:22, which is the verse we will be focusing on this morning. Both of these texts are printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

*22 By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.*

*22 So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s house. Joseph lived 110 years. 23 And Joseph saw Ephraim’s children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph’s own. 24 And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” 25 Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.” 26 So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

The first year of my ordained ministry as a pastor in 2008, I had an older, more experienced minister take me under his wing and teach me something I had never learned in seminary - the proper deportment of a pastor at a funeral and graveside service in relationship to the body of the deceased.

“Your responsibility, as soon as the service begins,” I was taught, “is to never leave the body.”

The pastor leads the funeral service at the pulpit, looking down on the body in the casket before him.

Then, when the casket is opened for the final time after the service for the congregation to pass by their loved one and say a last goodbye, the pastor is to stand at the head of the body.

Then, the pastor walks in front of the casket and leads the body to the hearse. The pastor is to ride to the graveyard either in the hearse itself if there is room, or in the car immediately behind. And once the deceased arrives at the graveyard, the pastor is to take his place at the head of the body and lead the casket from the hearse all the way to its final resting place.

The pastor is to never leave the body until the end, until the baptized man or woman is “sown in the ground” to use the words of the Apostle Paul, where they will join all the saints who have gone before them in waiting for the resurrection on the last day.

And since I learned what I was supposed to do as a pastor at a funeral, I’ve had the privilege of practicing that ritual many times. I’ve officiated at the burials of both of my father’s parents. I’ve officiated at the funerals of church members in St. Louis and here in Texas.

The practice I’ve described is a subtle one, to be sure. But it communicates something essential. That my responsibility as a pastor to a member of my flock does not end with their death, but continues all the way until they are buried in the ground.

And that the dead body of the person is being buried is still them - still a person, still deserving of pastoral care.

Now, this kind of treatment of the body of Christian persons after their death is derived from texts like the one we heard today in Hebrews 11:22, where the apostle writes: *By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.*

It's fascinating to me that of all the moments in the life of Joseph that are recorded in Genesis, this is the one that the Apostle chooses to focus on here.

Not Joseph's faithfulness during his slavery in Egypt. Not Joseph's rejection of the temptation of Potiphar's wife. Not Joseph's faithfulness in the Egyptian prison. Not Joseph's interpretation of dreams, or his elevation to Pharaoh's right hand or his saving an entire region of the world from starvation. Not even Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers for their great sins against him.

No, what the Apostle chooses to highlight regarding Joseph's faith is the directions he gave to his brothers and his descendants concerning the burial of his body after his death.

Interestingly, though you don't hear this much discussed in these modern times, the burial of the bodies of Abraham, Sarah and their descendants is one of the primary themes of Genesis.

In Genesis 23, as we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning, Abraham goes through significant trouble and expense to care for the body of Sarah after her death, and purchases the cave of Machpelah to use a burial place for his wife.

Genesis also goes on to record the burial of Abraham in that same cave, followed by the burial of Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Leah, all in that same location. Jacob, as the end of Genesis records, died in Egypt, and his sons carried his body at his request back to the land of Canaan that he might also be buried with his fathers.

The cave of Machpelah is the first and only part of the promised land that Abraham ever owns for himself, and it is significant that this land is not land that he inhabits during his life, but rather after his death. His body is placed there, beside his wife, and eventually his son and grandson and their wives are buried there as well.

Abraham, as Hebrews 11 teaches us regarding the sacrifice of his son Isaac, knew of and believed in the resurrection of the dead, and so he instinctively, by faith, lays claim to the land of promise with the dead body of his beloved wife, burying her as a sign that, by faith, he knows that God will fully give both Sarah and himself this land in the resurrection.

And Joseph, at the end of Genesis, imitates his great-grandfather's faith by giving instruction concerning his bones as well, and is commended for it by the writer of Hebrews.

And we read in Exodus and in Joshua how, hundreds of years later, Joseph's descendants remembered his instructions and obeyed them, carrying his bones with them in a coffin as they left Egypt, and finally burying him in the promised land as he had commanded.

Now, in the time we have remaining, I want to spend some time applying the teaching of this passage, and the teaching of the Scriptures as a whole to us today.

And the main application I want to make of our passage this morning is to argue that it is right and good for us also, as Christian persons, to, by faith, give instructions concerning the burial of our bodies after our death.

In other words, I believe and I want us to see that the Scriptures teach that we *should* be buried after our deaths in contrast to other ways that we might our dead bodies, and that the Bible considers the burial of those who belong to Christ to be a pious and holy act of faith.

I know that this may be a bit controversial, but it's worth pointing out that the first 1900 years or so of Christian history, a statement like this from a pastor would not have been controversial at all. In fact, it would have been completely self-evident.

But much has changed in the last century in terms of our customary treatment of the dead. And the biggest change is that in the late 19th century, cremation of dead bodies began to be practiced in the United States for the first time since its colonization in the early years of the 17th century.

It's kind of fascinating to think about this, but the first crematory was not built in our nation until 1876.

Since its establishment over 100 years ago, cremation, or the burning of the dead body into ash, has gradually become a popular alternative to burial in our culture - and in recent years, it has increased even more.

According to the Cremation Association of North America, in 1999, 25% of American deaths were handled via cremation - but in the last 20 years, that number has more than doubled, all the way to 54% in 2019.

I have to be honest with you, friends. I do not consider this shift in our culture's practice of how we treat the bodies of our loved ones after their deaths to be inconsequential.

I believe that the increasingly popularity and acceptance of cremation reflects two shifts primarily - first that our culture is increasingly uncomfortable with death itself, and wishes for dead bodies to be disposed of as quickly and as conveniently as possible, and second that our culture no longer views the bodies of our loved ones as worth the time, trouble, or perhaps most importantly, the expense that burial in a graveyard requires.

For, as you likely know, the reason most often cited for why Americans choose to cremate the bodies of their dead is based on a very simple and unarguable assertion - it is substantially less expensive than the alternative. And that is true. I don't deny it.

But I would argue that at least in the church, this is a cultural trend that we should, and indeed must push back against.

For how we treat our dead is perhaps one of the most important witnesses we have about what we believe human beings are, and what we believe a dead body united to Christ actually is, and what our faith in the resurrection is all about.

And how we treat our dead not only bears witness to the watching world, but it also bears witness to our children, and to our children's children about what we believe regarding these things.

Now, I know that I am treading a difficult line here.

I know that it is likely that many of us in this room have had loved ones who were cremated. And I know that it is possible that some of us may have already made plans for our own bodies to be cremated.

But, as your pastor, I want to speak to you honestly about these matters, from the heart, and seek to convince you of the importance of Christian burial. I think it is that important.

But first, let me make these two disclaimers.

First, I would not say that cremation of the dead is necessarily a sin against God. There may be situations where it is permissible. And I know that many times we do not have ultimate control over what happens to the bodies of our loved ones after their death. There are times when that decision is out of our hands.

Second, I am not saying that whether we cremate or bury our dead makes any ultimate difference in their resurrection.

Of course God can and will raise the dead in Christ no matter what happens to their bodies after death.

Many martyrs were burned at the stake, some were eaten by wild animals, others were chopped into pieces and scattered to the corners of the land. All of these and all who belong to Jesus will, on the last day be raised.

And yet, I believe that there is good reason for us to spend our treasure and give instructions that we might be buried after our deaths as our final act of faith in this world.

First, I believe this because burial is the unanimous practice used for the bodies of the faithful dead in the Scriptures.

In many ways, this is the fundamental argument for Christian burial - that Scripture itself records it and commends it again and again.

As we have already discussed, Abraham spent a great deal of money and went through a substantial amount of trouble to bury his wife Sarah.

And Scripture explicitly records the burial of Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and Joseph. All of them, without exception, were buried, not cremated.

But that's not all. In one of the most fascinating stories in the Pentateuch, we are told that after his death, God himself buried the body of Moses after his death, in a secret and hidden place.

Now, if what happens to our bodies after death is irrelevant to God, then why did God take the trouble himself to bury Moses, the man who perhaps above all others enjoyed the most intimate communion with God before the coming of Jesus Christ? But God did not obliterate Moses's body. He buried it, and he took the trouble to tell us that he buried it so that we would have his example.

And the record in the Old Testament continues. Joshua is buried. The judges are buried. Samuel is buried. David is buried. The kings of Judah are buried.

And in the New Testament this practice of burial continues. Mark records how the headless body of John was taken by his disciples and buried.

Lazarus is buried, because his sisters loved him and were pious women.

Acts tells us that devout men found the mangled body of Stephen after his stoning and buried him with lamentation.

And of course, most importantly, each of the four gospels takes special care to record how the body of our Lord Jesus was adorned with spices, wrapped in linens, and buried by his friends on the day of his death.

Simply put, to argue that what happens to bodies of Christian persons after their death is inconsequential is an argument that runs directly against the consistent and unanimous witness of Scripture - including our passage this morning from Hebrews, which tells us that Joseph, by faith, gave instructions for burial of his body before his death.



And the universal practice of burial continues, without interruption, through the whole history of the Christian church until the last 100 years.

The early church, of course, came into existence in a broader culture that valued the soul over the body, and both the Greeks and Romans practiced cremation extensively - because from their point of view - what is the body, after all, but a prison for the soul?

In that context, the burial practices of the early Christians were one of most visibly distinctive things about them in the context of their culture, so much so that the Roman emperor Julian in the 4th century identified Christians by these three marks - their loving service to strangers, their truthfulness, and their burial of their dead.

And Francis Schaeffer argues persuasively that one of the clearest ways to map the spread of Christianity across Europe is to see, in the archaeological record, the establishment of cemeteries - for whenever the Christian faith has infected and transformed a culture in its history, it has always, without exception, resulted in that culture beginning to bury and no longer burn its dead.

But the final reason why we should bury our dead is because of what we believe theologically about the significance of the human body.

Human beings are made, body and soul, in the image of God. When death occurs our souls are unnaturally ripped from our bodies, but this does not mean that God is finished with our bodies.

No, God has promised again and again, throughout the Scriptures, that the ultimate sign of his faithfulness and love for us will be displayed in this - that he will raise our bodies from the dead on the last day, that they might be reunited with our souls and we might live forever with him.

One of the things that most frustrates and saddens me about our present cultural moment is how Christians, and even Christian pastors, frequently speak about the bodies of those who have died in Christ.

You have probably all been at a funeral where a pastor has pointed to the casket and told the congregation - that's not Uncle John anymore. No, Uncle John isn't with us any longer. That's just his dead body. Uncle John is in heaven now, running and dancing.

Friends, let me be very clear. How we speak matters. And Christians ought not to speak of the dead in this way.

In the first place, while Uncle John's soul is in heaven, and that is a great blessing, it is untrue that his soul is running or dancing, because souls don't possess that capacity. Only bodies do. Indeed, 2 Corinthians 5 tells us that the souls of the elect after death groan as they wait in heaven to be clothed with their resurrection bodies.

The entrance of the soul into heaven after death is a precious promise in the Scriptures - make no mistake.

But it is a provisional state, a temporary condition - what we look forward to - what Christians have always looked forward to - is the resurrection of our bodies, the renewal of all creation, and the reunification of our soul and our body in glory.

In the second place, speech like this is unbecoming for Christians because the dead person's body *is* the still the person.

In many ways, this is the key and central question when it comes to what we do with the body after death.

Is the dead body still the person, or is the dead body just an empty container that the person has departed from?

Beloved, the Bible teaches us clearly that the dead person's body *is* the person.

This is borne out by the way in which the Scriptures refer to the bodies of saints after their deaths - a dead body is never referred to as "it" as though it were just a thing, but always by personal pronouns, and often, by name.

Genesis 23 tells us that "Abraham buried Sarah his wife" in the cave of Machpaleh - and by Sarah, Genesis means Sarah's dead body - for in the view of the Scriptures they are one and the same.

In John 11, Jesus tells his disciples, "Lazarus has died - let us go to him," by which of course Jesus means let us go to the place where Lazarus' dead body has been buried.

And in John 19, John records the burial of Jesus' corpse in this way: "Since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there." According to Holy Scripture, Jesus' dead body, cold, lifeless, was still Jesus.

And his friends had the wisdom to treat him as such and care for Jesus after his death, burying him in a tomb that he might rise again.

And our own theological tradition teaches the continuing personhood of the body after death with authority and conviction.

Listen to the words of our Shorter Catechism.

Q. 37. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

Christian bodies are precious to Jesus. Always and forever.

He made our bodies. He loves our bodies. He has claimed our bodies for himself, for he himself was made incarnate and has taken upon our flesh to die and rise from the dead that we might live forever, body and soul with him.

Our bodies are precious to Jesus at birth. Our bodies are precious to Jesus when we are young and full of health and strength. Our bodies remain precious to Jesus when they begin to fail us as we age and are ravaged by sickness or simply the passage of time. And our bodies continue to be precious to Jesus even after we die.

Even as they are lowered into the grave, Jesus remains united to the bodies of his beloved ones. He does not abandon them even for a second, though they decay and turn to dust in the grave.

For, according to what we believe and confess, our graves are but beds, where we sleep in death, waiting for the voice of Jesus to call us to life again.

Now, as we close, I just want to say this. My intention this morning is not to make anyone feel guilty.

My intention, simply put, is to bring the Scriptures to bear on something that I believe is very important to God - the way in which we treat our bodies, even after death.

And I do not think I should be silent as your pastor in the face of our present cultural moment when the Scriptures and Church history, and our theological tradition, speak so clearly and consistently on the importance of the practice of Christian burial.

And I encourage you to carefully consider what I've said this morning, and more importantly, what the Scriptures themselves say.

Now, if we all take this seriously and purchase burial plots and make arrangements for our burials one day - will it cost money? Yes, it will.

But friends, we always spend money on the things we consider most important. We spend thousands of dollars on homes and cars and college educations and vacations and all sorts of things that are important to us.

And I would argue, and I believe Scripture bears this out, that there is nothing in all of his physical creation that matters more to God, that matters more to our Lord Jesus, than the bodies of men and women who are made in his own image, who are the crown jewel of his creation.

Let us value our bodies, even in death, with the same significance that God does. And let us, by faith, bury our dead.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.