

A Rich Burial  
Isaiah 53:9  
Good Friday  
March 29, 2013

*He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

The final honor given to an important person is a rich burial. The pharaohs of ancient Egypt built pyramids for their tombs and lined them with gold. The Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., stand as landmarks to two great men. A towering tombstone or a granite mausoleum is a lasting tribute to honor the one whose name is inscribed on it.

On Good Friday, Jesus' shameful death was in the company of "wicked men," but according to God's plan he received the honor of a burial by "a rich man." Joseph of Arimathea gave Jesus a tomb that was suitable for a righteous, noble, and wealthy man. In other words, a rich burial. All baptized believers are buried with the lavish riches of God's grace in Christ, which promises resurrection and the priceless inheritance of eternal life.

Our Good Friday text is a carefully constructed prophecy about the end of Jesus' earthly life. We will look at each part of the text and examine the specific details uttered by Isaiah some 700 years before Christ.

Our verse begins: *He was assigned a grave with the wicked.* God the Father is the one who "assigned" to Christ his grave. The circumstances of Good Friday were not haphazard accidents of history. Rather, each event took place according to God's detailed, preordained plan.

And that prophetic plan was for Christ's grave to be among "wicked men." Those words might imply a dishonorable burial for Jesus, a pauper's grave, a meager memorial suitable for a common criminal. Yet our verse continues: *and with the rich in his death.* That second line would indicate an honorable, princely burial.

So how was Christ treated – as shameful or honorable, poor or rich?

As Jesus Christ died and was buried on this day nearly two thousand years ago, he fulfilled both lines of that verse. Jesus was assigned a grave with wicked men but he was buried with the rich. Moreover, his rich burial holds great promise for each of us.

The first part of God's plan made use of the scheme of Jesus' enemies. They plotted to kill the one who said he was the King of the Jews, even though his kingdom was not of this world. They bribed Judas to betray him.

Jesus was arrested and led through a series of pseudo trials before Jewish leaders and

the Roman governor. Pontius Pilate unjustly condemned Jesus to what was known in the ancient world as *mors turpissima crucis*, “the most vile death of the cross.”

In the narrative of Jesus’ death, we find violent criminals. Men who might even have thought they were serving God by opposing the Romans, but in reality were serving Satan with their lawless stealing and murder.

Pilate knew and admitted that Jesus was innocent. However, instead of freeing Jesus, Pilate freed Barabbas, a murderous rebel (Lk 23:19, 25). On Christ’s right and left, the Romans crucified two “evildoers” (Lk 23:32). Thus Jesus *was numbered with the transgressors* (Is 53:12 NIV).

The sinless Son of God withered away between two lawbreakers, *though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth* (Is 53:9). Such was the disgraceful death planned for Jesus by his enemies. In this way, the first line of our verse was fulfilled: *He was assigned a grave with the wicked.*

Jesus’ death in the company of despicable sinners ended his earthly ministry to and among sinners. Christ came to be known as the *friend of sinners* (Lk 7:34) because he associated with tax collectors and prostitutes, the poor and the lowly, those who were despised and scorned.

Now, in his death, Jesus identifies with sinners, executed as a criminal in the company of wicked men. His sole possession, a robe, became the prize in a game of dice. Forsaken, stripped of all dignity, and without any possessions, he dies in utter poverty.

This was God’s plan to bring us salvation. Jesus’ death in the place of sinners secured the forgiveness of sins for all humanity. Isaiah expresses this most eloquently: *He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed* (Is 53:5 NIV).

By grace alone and through Baptism into Christ’s atoning death (Rom 6:1–4; Col 2:11–14), God takes away our sin and clothes us in the robe of Christ’s perfect righteousness. The one who died in abject poverty gives us a share in the victor’s spoils, the riches of eternal life. Isaiah also foresaw this: *My righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong* (Is 53:11–12 NIV).

In ancient Israel, it was an honor to be buried next to your relatives. A man buried in the family plot slept with his fathers (Gen 47:30; Dt 31:16; 2 Sam 7:12). It was a dishonor to be consigned namelessly to a public cemetery (2 Kings 23:6; Jer 26:23; Mt 27:7–8). To be denied any burial was an abomination and God’s curse (Dt 28:26; 1 Kings 13:22). According to the Torah, even the worst of criminals who were impaled on a stake were to be buried; otherwise the corpse would defile the land (Dt 21:23).

But the pagan Romans, who lacked God’s Word, often left crucified victims on the cross, to be attacked by birds of prey and other scavengers, to suffer the most horrific

humiliation even after death. Christ's enemies may have envisioned such a dishonor for him.

But God the Father would not permit such disgrace to mock His Son after his death. As Jesus prayed: *Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit* (Lk 23:46 NIV), and breathed his last, he completed the redemption of all humanity for all time. Jesus' state of humiliation was over. Rich glory awaited him.

God's plan was that after Christ died in the company of wicked men, he was to be with the rich in his death. Joseph of Arimathea was a good and righteous Jewish man (Lk 23:50) who had become a disciple of Jesus.

He took a bold step of faith. God moved Joseph to ask Pontius Pilate for the body of Jesus. Joseph wished to give Christ his final honor. It took a brave man to request the body of criminal, because by doing so he declared his allegiance to the one who had been executed. That meant he could be next.

This Joseph was a rich man (Mt 27:57). His wealth included ownership of a tomb in a garden near Golgotha. Joseph had gone to the expense of having a tomb hewn out of solid rock – the most secure type of grave. It was not the tomb of Joseph's ancestors, but a new tomb. We are told that no one else had ever been laid in it. This tomb was probably meant to be Joseph's own resting place (Mt 27:60). But out of love for the Lord, who had taken his place on the cross, Joseph wanted Jesus to take his place in his costly tomb.

The sin of the first Adam caused humanity's expulsion from the garden paradise (Gen 2-3). But the second Adam leads humanity back into paradise through his burial and resurrection in another garden.

Most of us can't afford an imposing stone monument for our grave. Nevertheless, at the cemetery we pray: *Almighty God, by the death of your Son Jesus Christ you destroyed death, by his rest in the tomb you sanctified the graves of your saints, and by his glorious resurrection you brought life and immortality to light so that all who die in him abide in peace and hope.*

The ancient pharaohs of Egypt filled their pyramid tombs with gold and every precious commodity in the false hope that their wealth could secure a blessed afterlife. However, most of that gold and all those precious items have been stolen by grave robbers. But no one can rob us of God's priceless riches in Christ.

Forgiveness of sins is ours through Christ's crucifixion with wicked men. God declares baptized believers to be Christlike: to have done no wrong nor to have any deceit in our mouths, because Christ has taken away all of our sins. The promise of resurrection is ours through his temporary rest in the tomb of a rich man.