

43. The Burial

Here is what the Gospel tells us about the burial of Jesus:

“After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews’ Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby.” (John 19:38-42)

Mark 15:46,47 adds that Joseph placed the body in “...a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus observed where He was laid.”

“On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, ‘Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, “After three days I will rise.” Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, “He has risen from the dead.” So the last deception will be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.’ So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard.” (Matthew 27:62-66)

THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

According to the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3,4, the Gospel is summarized in three facts: Jesus Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures, he was buried, and he was resurrected on the third day, according to the scriptures. Jesus’ burial is important as confirmation of his death. He had to be buried because he was really dead. And that is an idea that some people have had difficulty in accepting, especially because Jesus died in a humiliating way,

nailed to a cross like the lowest of criminals. This is what is sometimes called “the scandal of the cross.”

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Most Jews did not want a suffering and humiliated Messiah. Rather they wanted a conquering Messiah who could use God’s miraculous power to deliver them from the political and military oppression of the Romans. Most Greeks did not want a Savior either. They wanted a philosopher who could impress them with his knowledge and eloquence.

A FALSE APPEARANCE?

But the Jews and the Greeks of the first century were not the only ones who were predisposed against the message of the death and resurrection of Christ. Most Muslims do not accept the idea that Jesus, whom they recognize nevertheless as a prophet, died on the cross. Their most important argument is based on the fourth surah of the Koran, which says on the subject of the Jews:

“But they broke their covenant; and they rejected the signs of God; and put the prophets to death without justification, and said, ‘Our hearts are sealed.’ It is God who has sealed their hearts, on account of their denial of the truth. Except for a few of them, they have no faith. They denied the truth and uttered a monstrous slander against Mary. They declared, ‘We have put to death the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God.’ They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been so]. And those who differ in this matter are in doubt concerning it. They have no definite knowledge about it, but only follow mere conjecture. But they certainly did not kill him. God raised him towards Himself. God is almighty and wise.” (An-Nisa’ 4:155-158) Goodword (2013-12-11). *Quran: A Simple English Translation* by Khan, Maulana Wahiduddin

This passage has been explained in several ways by Muslims. Some say that Jesus was hidden or that an angel protected him then one of his companions was killed in his place. Some say that God made Judas

Iscairiot to take on the appearance of Jesus and that it was he who was killed. Others say that Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross behind Jesus was substituted for him on the way to Calvary. Others simply say that the Jews tried to kill him but were unable to, and that God raised him to heaven without him going through death.

All these explanations have certain problems. For example, there is a moral problem if we say that God used trickery or deception to deliberately cause men to believe a lie. God is perfectly holy, pure and without sin. The Bible says clearly in Hebrews 6:18, "It is impossible for God to lie," and in Titus 1:2, "God... cannot lie." He had commanded in the Law of Moses, "You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another" (Leviticus 19:11). He who tells us not to use deceit, would He turn around and use deceit with us? How could we trust Him from then on? Far be it from God, the God of truth—far be it from Him to deceive people, to persuade them to believe what is false. He would not use His miraculous power to deceive people. Satan is the one who acts this way. Let us not dishonor God.

But can we believe that without miraculous intervention by God, men could crucify and bury another in Jesus' place? While he was on the cross, he was recognized by the Roman centurion and his soldiers, the passers-by who had heard him preach, the Jewish leaders and the two thieves. There were also those who knew him well—women who had accompanied him in Galilee, his own mother and his disciple, John. His body would have been easily recognizable after having been raised on the cross, not only by his face but also by the wounds caused by the crown of thorns that the soldiers had placed on his head. Moreover Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who buried his body, as well as the women who observed when the body was prepared, knew Jesus very well. Without miraculous deceit, they could not have mistaken another for him.

We should point out that there is another way of understanding the passage of the Koran which we read. In context, this is a rebuke spoken against the Jews who had rejected the prophets of God, spoken against Mary and boasted of having crucified Jesus Christ. In refuting the Jews, the Koran says, "They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been so]." This is not to say that there was no crucifixion but that if it took

place, it was God who was responsible for it. The Jews only did what God, the Almighty, allowed them to do to carry out His plan. The same sort of language is found in the eighth surah of the Koran, which speaks of the actions of the Muslims in the battle of Badr: "You did not slay them, but God slew them, and when thou threwest, it was not thyself that threw, but God threw, and that He might confer on the believers a fair benefit" (*al-Anfal* 8:17). The Muslim believers had, in fact, killed their adversaries, but it was only, according to the idea of this verse, with the aid and according to the will of Allah.

This way of understanding the passage on the crucifixion of Jesus is in closer agreement with certain other passages of the Koran that speak of the death of Jesus. For example, in the Surah 19, Jesus, while still a baby in Mary's arms, says these words: "Peace be upon me, the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!" (19:34). And in the third surah, God said, "O Jesus, I will cause thee to die and exalt thee in My presence" (3:55).

HIS DEATH IN THE PLAN OF GOD

Yes, Jesus was crucified and put to death, but it was according to the will and eternal plan of God. In the course of his ministry, Jesus had warned his disciples several times about the death that awaited him. In Luke 18:31-33, for example, we read:

"Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.'"

When he was on the cross, Jesus said, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). These words come from Psalm 22. In quoting this, Jesus brought to the attention of everyone that the psalm had predicted a thousand years in advance the suffering he was undergoing. This passage contains the exact words that were used by those who mocked Jesus (verses 8,9). It spoke of the thirst of one who is crucified, of the way the hands and feet of the Lord would be pierced, how his bones would separate, and that men would draw lots to divide up his clothes among themselves. God had seen and announced all of this in a single psalm of David.

But let's return to those words, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" This was not just a way of saying "Read Psalm 22 and you will see that my death was predicted in detail." Jesus, for the first time since eternity, was separated from the Father, actually abandoned. In that moment, he carried the sins of the entire world.

We read the following about Jesus in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Now, God cannot tolerate sin or be in communion with sin. The Old Testament says, "You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness" (Habakkuk 1:13). On the day of judgment, the Lord will say to the guilty, "Depart from Me, you cursed" (Matthew 25:41); "These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power..." (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Physical death is the separation of body and soul. Spiritual death is the separation of man from God. Jesus submitted to both of these for us so that we could have eternal life.

The message of the Gospel—the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus—may be a scandal to some, but for those of us who believe, it is truly the power and wisdom of God for our salvation. Why deny the death of Christ? Not only is it confirmed by history and by the Word of God, but without it we have no hope.