

## 2 GRAVES - 1 BODY

EASTER, 2010

Sir Walter Raleigh is remembered as one of the most dashing and colorful figures of the early history of our nation. He was one of the first people to have a vision of planting colonies on American soil. The legend of his spreading out his coat for Queen Elizabeth to cross over a mud puddle is well known. Whether he actually performed that act of chivalry or not is often questioned, but it cannot be disputed that Raleigh was one of the Queen's favorites. It was Queen Elizabeth who enriched Walter with estates and knighted him in 1584. And in return, Sir Walter served Queen Elizabeth well - it was his administrative skills that brought many blessings both to our land and to England.

After Queen Elizabeth's death, the fortunes of Sir Walter Raleigh quickly changed. King James was very suspicious of this flamboyant and powerful man. Sensing his influence drifting away, Raleigh joined in an attempt to dethrone James. The plot was uncovered and King James now had his excuse to lock Sir Walter Raleigh in the Tower of London and try him for treason. Raleigh was tried, found guilty and sentenced to be executed.

After Sir Walter Raleigh was beheaded, as someone was cleaning out his jail cell in the tower of London, he found his Bible with these words written on the inside cover, dated the day before his execution.

*Even such is time, that takes in trust our youth, our joys, our all we have,*

*And pays us but with age and dust; who in the dark and silent grave,*

*When we have wandered in our ways, shuts up the story of our days.*

*But from this earth, this grave, this dust, My God shall raise me up, I trust!*

History is filled with examples of people who were able to gain the strength to face death courageously because of their hope in the resurrection from the dead. The basis for this hope is found in the event that we celebrate today and really every Sunday of the year - the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the grave. The importance of this event in human history is seen in the fact that the disciples moved their day of worship to Sunday so that the resurrection could be celebrated every week of the year.

I want to look at the importance of the resurrection in the lives of Christ's followers with you this morning. This is critically important for us to see for the change in the lives of Christ's follower's offers indisputable evidence to the reality of Christ's resurrection. And it also provides an example for us. For we too can experience those same changes in our lives as the truth of Christ's resurrection grips us. We are going to take an unusual approach in looking at the change in the lives of Christ's followers this morning by

comparing the deaths of the 2 greatest men in God's eyes who lived in the first segment of the 1st century A.D. and seeing the effect of their deaths on the lives of their disciples.

There can be no question that the man named Jesus was the greatest man in God's eyes who lived during those days when the Herods ruled over the area that we call Israel today. Jesus was the man who had been named by the angel in a vision to Joseph. The ancient prophet Isaiah had written that another appropriate name for this man would be Immanuel - which means God with us. This man would also be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus Christ was a unique man having both a divine and human nature. He was the promised Messiah. Certainly, there can be no question that he was the central figure on earth in God's eyes as the divine program of redemption was being executed for the human race and he remains the center of all human history.

But listen to the words of Jesus as he spoke to his followers as recorded in Matthew 11:11: *I tell you the truth: among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.* Now that's quite a testimony, isn't it? Of all the people who have ever been born to this point, there hasn't been anyone who is greater in the eyes of God than John the Baptist. Not Adam, the first man created, nor Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel, nor Moses who received the ten commandments from God himself, nor David the greatest king of Israel, nor Elijah that great prophet of Israel - no one has been greater than John the Baptist. So I think that we could say with confidence that when we are speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist, we are talking about the 2 greatest men in God's eyes during that time when the Herods ruled Palestine for the Roman Government.

Now I want to make some comparisons between Jesus and John the Baptist this morning - and there are many that can be made. But we plan to focus mainly on the comparisons between the followers of Jesus and the followers of John the Baptist. For both of these men had many disciples. There were many people who had committed their lives to following their examples and their teachings. This should not surprise us at all. For great people who are great leaders always attract followers. There are those who recognize the influence of great leaders and want to pattern their lives after their examples. This characteristic distinguishes great leaders from other people. If a person doesn't have a following of disciples, that person isn't a great leader. It doesn't matter how much he claims to be a leader - a leader by definition has followers. So it should not surprise us that both Jesus and John the Baptist had many followers.

\*The **worthiness** of both Jesus and John the Baptist to have many followers cannot be disputed for both of these men were great men. Jesus was the unique Son of God; John the Baptist was one of the greatest prophets who ever lived. These facts were recognized by almost everyone who lived during their

lifetimes. The jealous religious leaders wanted to put Jesus to death for some time but were afraid to touch him because he was recognized to be such a great man by the multitudes of people. And these same religious leaders were afraid to say anything negative about John the Baptist because he was so respected and revered by the citizens of Israel.

\*So it certainly doesn't surprise us that both Jesus and John the Baptist had loyal followings. Jesus had fishermen who had left productive family businesses to follow him; tax collectors who had walked away from lucrative businesses to follow him for no pay at all; men who left secure positions on family farms to follow Jesus. John the Baptist had religious leaders who came after him to hear his teachings about God; tax collectors who left their materialistic lifestyles to adopt his ascetic way of life; even soldiers who recognized the superiority of his chain of command over their powerful Roman generals. Both Jesus and John the Baptist had thousands of followers who loyally dedicated their lives to following their examples and teachings as disciples.

\*And both Jesus and John the Baptist not only lived exemplary lives, but they also suffered inhumane, cruel and unjust deaths in a premature manner as martyrs. The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ is well known. The injustice of the mock trial has been well documented. There were at least 9 clear breeches of Jewish and Roman law which in any other trial would have caused the judge to declare an immediate mistrial. Among the most serious were the prohibition against holding court after the sun set, the lack of any witnesses who could give credible testimony against Jesus, and the law requiring a waiting period of at least 24 hours between the conviction and execution of an individual when a capital offense had been committed. But in an obvious disdain of justice, the only perfect and sinless man who has ever lived was convicted of a capital offense and sent to his death. And we are all familiar with the cruel and inhumane treatment that the Jesus Christ received in his death. The mocking that he endured, the beatings that he received, the crown of thorns that pierced his head, and the slow, agonizing pain of execution endured by crucifixion.

John the Baptist also suffered an injustice, inhumane and cruel death. John was imprisoned for simply telling the truth. He offended the King by speaking out against the incest that Herod was committing with Herodias, his sister-in-law. In a moment of drunken passion, Herod promised his step-daughter anything that she wanted, and, speaking as Herodias' mouthpiece, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. John the Baptist was then beheaded, not for any crime that he had committed or for any wrong that he had done. But he was executed just for telling the truth and standing up for what was right. Yes, both Jesus Christ and John the Baptist were executed as martyrs by the ruling authorities in cruel and inhumane manners - one by crucifixion and the other by having his head cut off.

\*And it is interesting that in both cases, their followers responded initially in the very same way, demonstrating their respect and loyalty for their teachers. Two of Jesus' secret followers, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, came to the Roman authorities and asked for the body of Jesus so that they might give him a proper burial. Pilate allowed them to take Jesus away to be buried in Joseph's own tomb. Both Joseph and Nicodemus risked a great deal in asking for the privilege of burying Jesus - for both were members of the Sanhedrin, the body that had condemned Christ to death. So, in identifying themselves with this now deceased teacher, they were cutting themselves off from the most prestigious and elite body in the nation of Israel. But they were willing to do so, and this demonstrates their courage and loyalty to Christ.

Likewise, John's followers came forward and took his body for proper burial. After recording the account of John's death, Matthew 14:12 says in beautiful simplicity, *John's disciples came and took his body and buried it.* Their action likewise shows great loyalty to John and courage. I mean, after a powerful despot like Herod had condemned someone and executed him, it would take a great deal of fortitude to step forward and ask for the body to bury it. Who would know if the King wouldn't turn on the disciples and kill them too just because of association.

\*Yes, there can be no doubt that there are a number of similarities between the lives and deaths of Jesus and John the Baptist and the dedication and loyalty and courage of their followers.

\*But what I want to draw special attention to this morning is the different manner in which Christ's disciples and John's disciples responded after the deaths of their leaders. And this is very critical and important for us to see. For, as we have already noted, there is a consistent pattern in the lives of both Christ's and John's followers during their lifetime and immediately after their deaths. But as time then elapsed after the departure of the teachers, the followers began to take two very distinct directions.

\*The disciples of John the Baptist began to break up and disperse. Most of them stopped meeting together. Many of them began to follow Christ who was still living at the time. It is true that there were some who remained distinct and could be found even in the city of Ephesus as late as Acts 19, but they were the exception, not the rule. Most of the followers of John dispersed after his death. The leader was dead; the unifying factor for the followers was gone; so the disciples eventually broke up and went their separate ways. This shouldn't surprise us at all - for this is the natural course of action.

\*But something very different happened after Jesus Christ died. It is true that the disciples broke up and scattered for a few days following his death, each going to his separate home. But then something remarkable occurred. Christ's followers came back together again. And they came back together with a unity that was greater than they had before Jesus was crucified. They came back together with a new

resolve and dedication. They came back together different people, with a new courage and strength. And not only did they come back together personally, but they began to bring multitudes of others together with them. Within just days of Christ's death, there were 120 of them united together. Within 50 days of Christ's death, there were over 3,000 of them united together. Within another month, there were another 5,000 united together. And from that point on, the number of disciples grew and spread throughout the Roman Empire and the world. Every single one of the original disciples, except for Judas Iscariot who betrayed the Lord Jesus, was willing to give his own life in a violent and unjust manner as a martyr for his commitment to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor has this phenomenon stopped yet to this very day. While we are meeting here this morning, worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ together, disciples of Christ are being added to his following throughout the world. Millions are risking their lives, meeting in secret in countries where Christianity is illegal, so that they might worship and honor Jesus Christ.

Now there is only one explanation for the response of Christ's disciples to his death. What happened is not the natural course of human history. It didn't happen with the disciples of John the Baptist. Why did Christ's followers respond in such a seemingly unnatural manner?

There can only be one answer to that question. While the followers of John the Baptist buried their leader courageously in respect, John remained entombed in that grave. But when the disciples of Jesus buried Him in that tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, Jesus Christ did not remain there long. On the third day, he arose in power and victory over death. And there can be no reasonable doubt that he arose again from the dead. The disciples certainly knew where he had been buried - Joseph of Arimathea wouldn't forget where his own tomb was. And there can be no reasonable assertion made that the disciples stole his body as the Jewish leaders would try to claim. If the disciples were trying to carry out a plot of deception for their fallen leader, do you think that their lives would have been so radically changed to the point where each of them would be willing to die a martyr's death for the cause? There can be no question that the disciples truly believed that their teacher had raised from the dead - the change in their lives demonstrates this to be the case without question. And the Roman authorities or the Jewish leaders couldn't have taken the body of Jesus. For they were opposed to the spread of the early church. And all they would have had to do in order to squelch the growth of the church and nip it right in the bud is just to produce the body of the dead leader, Jesus who had claimed to be the Christ. But they couldn't. No matter how badly they wanted to. They couldn't because they didn't know where the body was. For Christ had risen from the dead just as he had predicted that he would. In fact, the first sermon that Peter preached in which 3,000 members were added to the infant church was preached almost in view of Joseph's tomb. All that people would have had to do in

order to verify what Peter was claiming was walk a few minutes over to the tomb and look at it for themselves. There can be no doubt that the tomb was empty - and there is no reasonable explanation for what happened to the body apart from Jesus Christ rising from the dead.

So then, the different response between John's disciples and Christ's followers is found in the fact that while there remained 2 graves, there was only 1 body. John the Baptist died, and was buried, and his body remained in the tomb. While his disciples respected and admired him and undoubtedly continued to have an affection and love for him, they gradually dispersed and went their separate ways - for their leader who had given to them cohesiveness was gone. But while Jesus Christ died and was buried just like John, his body rose from the grave. The angel could say of Jesus, *He is not here, for he is risen*. Christ's resurrection had a dramatic effect on his followers. Instead of dispersing, they became more unified. Instead of cowering in fear, they became more courageous. Instead of becoming disheartened, they were filled with hope. Instead of gradually forgetting his words they became more dedicated to his teachings. Their belief in the resurrection of Christ changed their lives dramatically.

Has the truth of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ changed your life? If you truly see the significance of this event in history, you can never be the same again.

\*You will have a new relationship with Jesus Christ, the son of God, that will bring a lasting satisfaction into your life.

\*You will have a new dedication to devote your life to the only thing that is lasting and eternal - the building of God's glorious kingdom.

\*You will have a new hope for the future. For just as the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, one day all of those who are in Christ will rise as well. The grave of John the Baptist was the end of a school. But the empty tomb of the Lord Jesus Christ was the beginning of the church. So, for the Christian, physical death is not the end, but it is rather the beginning - and the hope of that glorious truth affects every aspect of the life of the one who truly follows the Lord Jesus Christ.

\*We can have this hope because the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross defeating the Depravity of Sin, Death and the Devil and rose in victory from the grave.

\*The elders are now going to join me at the Lord's Table as we picture the great redemption that the Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished for us in a symbolic way.