

# 'Laid Him in a Sepulchre Which Was Hewn Out of a Rock, and Rolled a Stone Unto the Door of the sepulchre.' Mar 15:46

by G. Campbell Morgan

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*The sermon reflects on the death of Jesus and the loss of the things of beauty that He represented, including a conception of God, an ideal of humanity, and a passion to redeem.*

**Scripture:** Mark 15:46, John 11:25

**Topics:** "Hope in Despair", "Death and Resurrection"

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## Description

G. Campbell Morgan reflects on the profound sorrow surrounding the burial of Jesus, emphasizing the despair felt by His followers as they laid Him in the tomb, sealing it with a stone. He explores the implications of this event, noting the death of a beautiful conception of God, an ideal of humanity, a passion for redemption, and the essence of religion itself. Morgan poignantly illustrates how these elements lay lifeless in the grave, representing a moment of ultimate defeat for humanity. However, he transitions to the hope found in the resurrection, affirming that these concepts are not truly dead, as the stone was rolled away, signifying God's ultimate victory over death. The sermon concludes with a message of faith, love, and hope that transcends despair.

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## Transcript

"And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulchre." Mar 15:46.

Mar 15:33-47.

THERE is a note of brooding melancholy about these words. They revive some of our own most despairing experiences. The open grave, the mortal remains laid therein, the closing of the grave, the going back to face the days ahead without the comradeship of the loved one; these are the things that come crowding back upon us as we read these words, "a stone against the door of the tomb."

As we separate the thought suggested by the words from the sequel of the narrative, all these feelings of the heart are accentuated a thousand-fold when we think of the One Whose body was placed within the rock-hewn tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea. The shadows of evening were gathering about the garden when

this thing was done. It was the close of a stupendous day. At nine o'clock in the morning they had crucified the prophet of Nazareth, Who, while He saved others, could not save Himself; and for three hours the tides of human passion had raged around Him on His Cross. At noon supernatural darkness had settled upon the scene, and at three of the afternoon He had breathed out His Spirit. Now, at even, two men, Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus, are seen enswathing the body, and laying it in the tomb; while two women, Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Jesus, are watching. These acts of love being completed, Joseph rolled the stone to the entrance of the already prepared tomb: "A stone against the door of the tomb."

Here we pause. This is death's victory. The world is without Christ. What lay buried in that grave? Our meditation is an attempt to answer that enquiry; that we may consider together the beauty of that which was dead, and the ugliness of the fact of death.

First we see the death of things of beauty. "A stone against the door of the tomb." When referring to the beauty of that which was dead, I am thinking not so much of the personal and sentimental, as of the universal and essential. To the disciples at the moment, the former things were of course the most real, and supreme; the personal loss, the sense of loss, the sentimental consciousness. It is at this point that we feel the most acute human sympathy with them, realizing that in that scene and those circumstances, there are elements with which we are appallingly and tragically familiar to-day; not with a familiarity that breeds contempt, for no man who loves life loves death, or pretends to admire it. It is ghastly, horrible, devilish, wherever it appears. Yet larger things were involved in the disciples' sense than those which were personal and sentimental; and our thought is not so much of them in that personal and sentimental sense, as of the world, of the ages, of life in its entirety. In that grave wherein lay the body of the dead Jesus, life was challenged, insulted, and spit upon, as it never had been before, and as it never has been since. Whatever we may feel about the tragedy of death, here it is in its most ghastly form; for here, central to human history, is a death by the side of which none other seems to be able to compare.

I enquire what then lay within that tomb? I propose to answer the enquiry by referring to four things that for those three days and nights the world had lost, and which the world had lost for ever if this had been the end of Jesus. The things of beauty which we have been looking upon as we have studied this Gospel; which our eyes have seen, and we have beheld, which we have heard as we have caught the accents of the voice of the dead Man, which we have spiritually touched and handled as we have grown familiar with Him, walking the ways of men; these things of beauty have been slain, and now lie dead in that rock-hewn tomb.

In that tomb there is first a dead conception of God. There is moreover, a dead ideal of humanity. There is beyond that, a dead passion to redeem. Consequently and finally, there is a dead religion.

A dead conception of God. Not long before His Cross, when one of His enquiring disciples, Philip, had in his agony cried out amid the shadows of the upper room, "Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us," Jesus had said, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." In order to be true to the line of our meditation, without arguing the truth of that declaration of Jesus, but accepting it as from Himself, we now enquire what conception of God had been presented in Him? What was His idea of God? Not the idea of His, teaching, for His claim was not that men who had heard Him had discovered the truth about God; but that "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." In the uttering of that word, on the purely human level, our Lord was proclaiming a truth that is of universal application. Every man reveals his god by what he is in himself. Every man has a god, however much he may deny the existence of the God in Whom we believe,

however much he may declare that he bends the knee to none in worship, and recognizes no authority over him other than that of his own will. The god of a man is that to which he yields the devotion of his life, in thought and energy. It may be gold, pleasure, fame; but seated at the centre of every human life is some master idea, passion, desire, enterprise; and that is the god of the man. Sooner or later that god will manifest itself in the man's life. There is a sense therefore, in which every man may say, He that hath seen me hath seen my god; for a man becomes like his god.

Now when Jesus said: "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father," I am aware that there were profounder significances in the word than this particular one, but we may begin here. What have we seen in Him as we have walked with Him during this time of our meditation upon this one brief Gospel? We have seen in Him grace and truth; mercy and justice; peace and righteousness. The wonder of the revelation, however, does not consist so much in these particular qualities as they have been represented in Jesus but in the fact of their union in Him. This union was a new revelation in man, and therefore a new revelation of God. Man had known something of God in the past, as to His truth, His justice, and His righteousness; and it is equally true-and no man can have been a diligent student of the old Hebrew prophecies without admitting it-they had known very much of His grace, mercy, and peace. But in Him these things were united, without doing violence to the distinctive value of either. The wonder and the marvel of the conception of God that had been given to these men who surrounded Jesus, was that in Him these things thus met. John declared, "We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father" and then he described what he meant in a phrase-"full of grace and truth." Grace, compassion, mercy; truth, the right, devotion to the essential; and yet the two things always merged in Him; grace and truth, mercy and justice, peace and righteousness. In the few brief years of His public ministry, His conception of God, not in His teaching alone, but in all that He was in Himself, had been given to a little group of men. It was a thing of ineffable beauty, a thing of surpassing wonder, a thing that we are compelled to admit, that after two millenniums have gone the Church has not been able finally to express the beauty of, with all its thinking, and all its devotion. Now that conception of God lies dead in a grave; and the stone is rolled against the door of the tomb.

In the second place there lay dead in that grave an ideal of humanity. Once again to quote the words of Jesus Himself He had said to men, "He that followeth Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life"; His meaning being that if a man would follow Him, that man would in Him see the light and glory of his own being. He claimed to have fulfilled in His own living the real meaning of the secret of the possibility of every human life. Looking back at Jesus from the standpoint of our common humanity, what then have we seen in Him? We have seen a Being, spiritual, but very definitely material. We have seen One Who in all His thinking and all His speaking and all His acting was perpetually conscious of the supernatural, the vastness that lies beyond; but equally and patently conscious of all the temporal and near, the things His hands touched, and upon which His feet trod. We have seen One characterized by an awful dignity, even in His humanity; a majesty so pronounced and so profound, that I make one brief statement with which all will agree, no one ever dared to take a liberty with Him. There was an aloofness about Jesus that held men away from Him. Yet there was a meekness which brought all men into the closest touch with Him; and publicans and sinners dared to draw nigh to Him for to hear Him.

Here again, the ideal of humanity revealed in the Person of Jesus is not so much that of these separate qualities, for we have also seen men who have been spiritual; we have come into contact with people supremely, conscious of the supernatural things; individuals who were characterized by a dignified majesty that prevented our taking liberties with them. On the other hand we have found in the common

crowd of people, men and women living within the temporal; and also people who were meek and merciful and generous. But the ideal of humanity in Jesus was the merging of these things in Him; for to Him the sacred and the secular were not two realms for ever to be kept apart. To Him all secular things were sacred; all sacred things were secular. The things of the vast eternities to Him were the things with which men were to deal every day and every hour in every circumstance, and every condition. All the little things of life were to be dealt with as related to the eternal things. With Him His majesty expressed itself in meekness. With Him His meekness was powerful in its majesty. These men had lived in close companionship for three years with a Man Who towered above them apart from His Deity, and His claims to Deity in His humanity. He was surpassingly wonderful, at once awe-inspiring and beautiful, in His revelation of the possibility of human life. Now that One lay dead, and they had rolled a stone to the door of His tomb.

Yet once more; and because of our own condition of heart and soul and life and experience, this thing is more wonderful than all. These men had seen in these three years, a human Being mastered by one passion, that of redeeming lost things. This was the story of His life: "The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost." That was new; that was something even the Hebrew religion, divine as it was in its origin, had never understood, never preached; that was something that Greek philosophy had never dreamed of, and would have laughed out of court as being unutterable foolishness. Men had known high inspirations before the coming of Jesus; they had desired to create the new, and that passionate desire was the inspiration of all artistic effort; they had craved to know the truth, and that craving was the inspiration of all philosophy; they had endeavoured to preserve the good, and that endeavour however much they had failed, had been the underlying reason of every attempt at government.

But in Jesus there appeared, -in the midst of the millenniums, centuries, cycles; in the midst of the artistic aspirations, the philosophic endeavours, and the efforts at government; -One Who said: My master-purpose in the world is not to create the new, is not to know the truth, is not to preserve the good; but to get hold of the effete, and make it new; to touch the false and transmute it into the true; to reach the bad, and make it good. "The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost." In proportion as we have the great human experience, in proportion as we are able to escape from ourselves individually, and to think in the terms of humanity as a whole, humanity as we know it, with all its sorrows and sighings, and wounds, with all its weariness, agonies, and heartbreaks, we shall realize that this is what we need supremely; some One Who can lay His hand upon the dead, withered flower, and make it live and blossom with new beauty; Who can lay His hand upon poor, withered, unworthy life, and make it beautiful again; a heart that beats with all the movements of compassionate Deity. That was the passion of Jesus. Where is He? Dead! They have rolled a stone to the door of His tomb!

Ultimately therefore I see dead in that grave, not merely a conception of God, an ideal of humanity, a passion to redeem; but resultantly, a religion; in all the broadest, widest, and most inclusive sense of that great and gracious word. A religion having foundations, having structural processes, having a finality in view; a religion that fundamentally was faith in God and in man; a religion that structurally was love working toward the satisfaction of the Divine heart, and the well-being of human conditions; a religion which in its finality was hope, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God, and consequently rejoicing in hope of the glory of man.

Speaking of Jesus of Nazareth again, as within the strict limitations of His humanity, and the fact of His manhood; that was His religion. It was based on faith in God and faith in man. The first need not be argued. The Christian religion, however, is not merely a religion of faith in God; it is also a religion of faith

in man. If we profess to believe in God, and do not believe in man, we are not Christians. The man who is for evermore declaring that humanity is an evil thing in itself, and that it must perish, is thinking without regard to the Christian religion. The word hopeless, with regard to man, must be cancelled from the vocabulary of all truly Christian souls. Jesus knew no hopeless cases. Individually, or socially, He believed in men. He so believed in them that He was willing to die to realize their latent, paralyzed, possibilities. That was the fundamental fact in His religion; belief in God, and belief in man.

How was His purpose to be realized? By loving God and by loving man. Here no argument is necessary. When He was asked which was the greatest commandment, His own word covers the whole ground: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind"; and, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." His faith in God and His faith in man was the inspiration of activity, growing out of His love. The Man Who thus had stood among His compatriots, and consequently at the centre of human history, giving to men this conception of God, giving to men this ideal of humanity, suggesting to men this new inspiration of life, and thus creating for men a religion; where is He, and what has become of Him? They have murdered Him; and now lies He there, and none so poor as do Him reverence. They have rolled a stone to the door of the tomb.

That we may be led a little further along what is necessarily a melancholy meditation, I want to speak of the ugliness of the death of these things of beauty. His conception of God was denied. In His death there was neither grace nor truth. In the activity that produced His death there was neither mercy nor justice. In His dying there was neither peace granted to Him, nor righteousness. All the things opposed to the things of God, joined to slay Him. Consequently His conception of God was destroyed in the hour of His dying. They put Him on the Cross. By their own action He was slain, and God was withdrawn from human life by the volition of humanity. This God of Jesus, the God of His thinking, His conception of God was absolutely refused.

His ideal of humanity lay dead. His ideal of humanity was proved impossible by His dying. Men mocked it, men trampled on it; men slew it, and would have none of it. Consequently the ideal must be abandoned. When they nailed Him to His Cross, and took the dead body down from the Cross and laid it in the grave, they said in effect: No, we will not have that. That is not the ideal of humanity to which we are willing to bow. They said, as He had indicated in one of His parables, "We will not have this Man to reign over us." That is not the ideal of humanity that we will accept!

More tragic still in a contemplation like this, producing more poignant grief in the heart than either of the other two; more terrible than the loss of the conception of God, than the loss of the ideal of humanity, is the fact that there lay dead a passion to redeem. It was refused. It was thus declared not worth while to try and redeem men. This was the conviction of the philosophy and wisdom of the age. Moreover it was impossible, and therefore it was foolish. Fling it out. We will not have it. Worthless things are not worth redeeming. There is no wealth in waste. And they were right, apart from Him. It is not worth while, because it cannot be done. That master-passion of the love that goes after lost things was dead, and in its tomb.

Consequently religion was dead. The foundation was destroyed, for He died, and was buried! We cannot believe either in God or man, if this be the end. Many are now reading Russian literature. So far as I have read, and am able to express any opinion, I do not know anything more wonderful in any literature than the writing of Dostoievsky. In his novel *The Idiot*, he describes two men, looking at Holbein's picture of Jesus being taken from the Cross. It is a terrible picture. One of the Russians, looking at the Cross, says: "I like

looking at that picture."

Consequently the structural motive of religion is withered at its root, for if I cannot believe in God I cannot love Him. And if I do not believe in humanity I cannot love it.

Finally therefore, and necessarily, the inspiration of religion is quenched; for if I cannot believe in God and love Him, nor in man and love him, I have no hope about to-morrow. A stone is against the door of the tomb!

What did that tomb contain? In the story in Mark there is something which is more significant than perhaps appears upon the surface. Joseph asked for "the body of Jesus." Pilate gave him "the corpse." There is a great difference in the two words. They are entirely different. Joseph begged for the body of Jesus, the soma (); Pilate gave him the corpse, the ptoma (). Joseph begged for the body of Jesus. The Greek word there referred to a body, as sound, and complete. I think when Mark wrote this Gospel, probably under the direction of Peter, he used these words carefully. This Greek word here used for a body, Homer always employed for a dead body, but from Hesiod onward in Greek writings, it was used of a living body. When Joseph asked for the body, he asked in the respectful term that referred to the body in its entirety and its beauty. It was the word that a lover would use. Pilate said He could not be dead already, and sent for the centurion; and as soon as the centurion showed that Jesus was dead, he gave to Joseph the corpse. What is the significance of that word? The ruin! That is what Pilate granted to Joseph. That is what they put in the grave.

Is that the end? If so, these are the things that we have lost; a conception of God, an ideal of humanity, a new master-passion in life to redeem, and therefore a religion. If that be the end then I declare that every succeeding grave is the continuity of ghastly despair, including the latest graves. If that be the end, then tombs forever accentuate the ghastly failure.

This melancholy consideration is necessary lest we fail to appreciate the transcendent wonder of the sequel. I dare not, however, end a meditation thus. So, while our meditation has been around certain words, we may be led to the sequel in Biblical words, where the same terms are employed, and so our present meditation may be complete. What have we seen?" A stone against the door of the tomb." Let us read again: "And very early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome come to the tomb when the sun was risen. And they were saying among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb? And looking up, they see that the stone is rolled back!"

In the ineffable glory of the light that breaks, we say, That conception of God is not dead, that ideal of humanity, continues, that passion to save will still inspire, and our religion abides, faith, love, and hope. Therefore all our graves are prophecies of God's great final victory.

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