

BURIAL GROUND

By Elaine Gingrich

(Written after a car accident in February, 1993 claimed the lives of five young people: Charlene Martin, Lavon Martin, Calvin Martin, Daniel Brubacher, and Wendall Roth.)

Beside the lane the spring lawn is soft, and a section of grass lifts and turns earth-side-up under my rake. Bursting acorns are uprooted and a beetle scuttles for cover. Carefully I flip over the loosened sod and pat it firmly back into place. As my foot tamps the yielding soil, I think of the earth teeming with life, and I think of the things we bury in the earth, things buried here and in other places. The earth is full of the living, the dying and the dead.

We willingly bury the bulbs and seeds in expectation of spring beauty and summer harvest. We bury refuse and fertilizer to tidy and improve. Yet a garden is by many considered unprofitable. And some things that we bury by choice and count as gain, others may regard as waste. We speak of the missionary burying his life in Africa. We talk about burying old grudges and feuds. We bury our unrealistic dreams in order to reap the real and possible. God Himself speaks of the old nature of man being buried, planted in the likeness of death, that the new nature should rise and live.

But sometimes we bury unwillingly or undesignedly or with tears. We speak of buried talents and wasted years. We bury our hopes and dreams and think of it as loss. The child buries his parent and grieves for the unreclaimable past. More painful still, the parent buries his child and mourns the unrealized future. The young father, swallowed up by oppressive prison walls, buries his claims to family life and comforts of home in order to remain loyal to his faith. Sometimes we are called upon to bury legitimate dreams, God-given desires, well-crafted worthy plans, precious vibrant children, the object of our love.

How shall we bury then? How can we? Is it for loss or gain? Sometimes we plant the natural with no chance of a natural harvest: we bury the earthy with no hope of an earthly return. The “glory of the terrestrial,”¹ so real to our humanity, is lost in corruption and weakness and sometimes even in dishonour.

The apostle Paul wrestled victoriously with the mystery of burial and by revelation concluded that “as we have borne the image of the earthy, we *shall* also bear the image of the heavenly.”² That which we bury “is of the earth, earthy.”³ Only the earthy can be buried. “The first man is of the dust of the earth,”⁴ but though that which we bury is “sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.”⁵ It is raised in glory, in incorruption and in power. It is raised a miracle.

All burial anticipates a miracle—the miracle of resurrection. The earth is forever making things new. “It is hard to imagine anything less hopeful than the sight of a burial.”⁶ What can appear more wasteful than a life cut short, deprived of fulfillment? But contemplate for a moment the burial scene, repeated millions of times in many different settings over the centuries. Then consider those heart-wrenching periods of history when our fleeing forefathers were denied their graves, when they were robbed of this last gesture of respect for their loved ones. Here we stand on holy ground.

1 I Corinthians 15:40 King James Version

2 I Corinthians 15:49 italics added

3 I Corinthians 15:47

4 I Corinthians 15:47 The New International Version

5 I Corinthians 15:44

6 A.W. Tozer, *This World: Playground or Battleground?* p.53

A burial is not an abandonment. It is the very opposite. It is an act of caring, a manifestation of decency and love and concern. With what tenderness and carefulness we gather for our final farewells. We are not abandoning, but committing.

All burial is a committal into the hands of God. The act of burial is an act of submission and trust. To submit precious seed into the hand of the Lord of the seasons, the master of spring and harvest, demands faith—faith in the Giver of life, the Resurrector of both dormant seeds and dead bodies. How can we bury in times of loss? “The Resurrection teaches us that we must not trust appearances.”⁷ We tend to equate the unseen with the forgotten—“out of sight, out of mind.” But though man may forget, God remembers. The forgotten bulb may still bloom in the spring. Faith is not frightened by bare brown earth, by appearances of defeat, but waits in hope. A missionary to China was asked why he lived out his life in such obscurity in China when he could have had a position of influence in the West. His reply was “Because I believe in the Resurrection.”

And so we plant in faith. We bury with hearts of submission. All burial is a committal into the hands of the God of miracles, the God of all comfort and hope, whose last word is the Resurrection. “And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.”⁸

7 Ibid, p.54

8 Revelation 21:5