

19 SOMETHING ABOUT THE CATACOMBS

Catacombs!

What a strange word.

What is a catacomb?

One of the many pagan customs is to cremate their dead. The German tribes who came to The Netherlands some hundred years B.C. also burnt or cremated their dead. The pagan Romans did as well.

The Jews did not cremate their dead but *buried* them instead. How often don't we read about funerals in the Bible? Just think of Abraham, who *buried* his wife Sarah in the cave of Machpelah. Or Jacob, who *buried* Leah in the same cave. Think of Samson, who was *buried* in his father Manoah's grave, or the tombs of the kings of Judah. In the New Testament, we also repeatedly read about funerals. We read about Lazarus, who had already been three days in the grave. The young man of Nain was also on his way to the grave. And there are many more examples in the Bible.

When Christianity began to expand throughout the Roman empire, the dead Christians also received a funeral. They were not cremated.

THE CATACOMBS UNDER ROME

The ground under Rome and various other eastern cities does not consist of sand and clay but stone. In that stony or rocky earth, people cut out passages. The rich buried their beloved dead in the chiselled openings in the walls. It became

necessary to constantly expand those underground passages. This tunnelling developed into an extensive network of underground passages where the Christians could bury thousands and thousands of their dead. It became



Catacombs, about Rome.com

a super underground maze. The tunnels would not cave in because the earth was hard and rocky.

These underground passages are called catacombs. We find such catacombs beneath Rome, Naples, Sicily, and Egypt. When the persecutions raged, the Christians found a safe hiding place in those underground passages. There they buried their dead. There they also came together to hear God's Word. Some writers say those catacombs are more than one thousand kilometres long! The deepest passages are about twenty-five meters under the surface of the ground. In some places, three or four passages are below each other.

Those catacombs are still there. They no longer use them as burial places but are open to tourists. However, it is very dangerous to go in them alone, for they are so extensive that it is easy to get lost, and you'd probably never find your way out! That's why you can only see them with a tour guide who knows the way.

Naturally, it is very dark, so deep in the earth. Those guides carry torches when they show visitors around, giving them the necessary light. In one area of Rome, they cleaned up a whole



Catacomb's. Early church history.com

section of the catacombs and installed electric lights. But they are not the actual catacombs.

Would you like to see the original catacombs?
Yes?

Okay, in our thoughts, we will travel to Rome and visit 'The Catacombs of Domitilla'.

A TOUR THROUGH THE CATACOMBS

On a warm summer's day in Rome, we are standing at the entrance of one of the most extensive catacombs. The guide has already lit his torch. He descends a rough stone staircase, and we follow him. The deeper we go, the darker it becomes. It gets chilly, and involuntarily we shiver. The guide keeps walking, and we follow him. The passages are narrow and low at times. We see openings on both sides of the walls. Someone has placed stones in some openings, but many are just open, and we can see what is in them. We see dry bones, sometimes entire skeletons. Yes, here we are, walking among the dead!

Some estimate the number of dead bodies here to be between 5 and 10 million. What an incredible sight it will be when all those dead will rise! The millions of dead in the catacombs will rise from the dust on that great day!

The mortal remains of many martyrs lie in these catacombs. They joyfully entered heaven, even though their bodies were torn to pieces by wild animals, and their loved ones could only collect their bones.



Part of a catacomb in Rome <https://gladiatortours.com/>

Many graves bear inscriptions, much like in our cemeteries now. How many gravestones aren't in our cemeteries? The burial site was cut out of the walls in the catacombs and sealed with some stones. On those stones, we may read various inscriptions. The person's name is inscribed, usually followed with: 'At peace.' Yes, many of God's people lie there in the depths of the earth until one day, the trumpet shall sound: "Arise you dead and come to judgment!"

The guide keeps going, and we follow him. We walk past many graves by the torch's flickering light and read many inscriptions.

Look there, in a stone is chiselled:
'Too soon you are fallen, Constantia, so beautiful and so charming. Constantia, rest in peace!'

That is the touching inscription of a girl of about eighteen years old. Perhaps her father or brother had gathered her bones from the arena and sadly and reverently buried them in the catacombs. We do not know, but the last words, "at peace", tell us that she was a believer. But we can't stop for too long, for our guide keeps walking. Silently we walk behind him.

We see inscriptions where, besides the name, they have also chiselled a palm branch. That palm branch points to the eternal victory of those who fell. At times we see a drawing of a dove. A dove is the emblem of peace.

Oh, we see so much as we continue our walk, too much to mention. Just look over there. We ask the guide to wait a moment. There, in a corner, is another gravestone. Its inscription reads: "Here lies Gordianus. He was killed for the faith. With his entire family. They rest in peace."

How those Christians have suffered! At times, entire families were massacred! Those cruel enemies spared no one! This gravestone is proof of that because that's what happened here. The cruel persecutors murdered this Gordianus and his whole family!

Who buried them and made that inscription?
Just read what is written underneath.
"Theofila, their maidservant".



catacomb of Priscilla <http://www.catacombeditalia>

Possibly risking her own life, this faithful handmaid had collected the remains of that family and buried them. That was the last thing she could do for them. With endless patience, she had chiselled those letters in that stone, and when she completed her difficult task, she engraved one last word: 'Fecit!' That means, 'I have done it.' Then she left, perhaps with her head bowed down and her eyes full of tears. But she was sure of one thing: 'They rest in peace.'

We could go on, but we can't read all the inscriptions because there are so many!

ART IN THE CATACOMBS

We also see many beautiful wall paintings in lovely colours: red and white, green and yellow, engraved on the walls of countless passages. There are many pictures of Bible stories among them. Over there, we see a painting representing Adam and Eve; we see Noah in the ark; a bit further, we spot Abraham, who offered his beloved son Isaac; again, some distance away,



Three young men in a furnace. Wikimedia

Moses at the burning bush. In that corner is a large painting of Jonah in the whale. We see pictures of Job, the young men in the fiery furnace, and Daniel in the lions' den. Oh, there are too many to mention. How much time, care, love and labour the families of the fallen must have spent on all those graves! Nothing was too much for them!

And so we wander through those endless passages. If we turn around, we only see pitch-black darkness behind us. If we look forward, we see more inky-black darkness. Only next to us, the torch's flickering flame gives light, which the guide holds up high.

What if we lost our guide?

Brrr, we try not to think about that, for we would lose our way hopelessly in that dreadful darkness and never find our way out! So many passages, so many twists and turns! How is it possible that our guide knows the way so well? We wander through very narrow passages, then wider ones.

Occasionally we come to a more extensive open area. Then the guide stands still for a moment and explains that when the persecutions raged, the Christians gathered here. Here they listened to the preaching of God's Word, and He strengthened His people when the Holy Spirit applied that spoken word to their souls. Here they also participated in the Lord's Supper. That was celebrated daily in those dark days, for no one was sure that he would be able to attend the next meeting. Every time they met, there were vacant

places for those languishing in prison or devoured by the wild animals.

The persecuted Christians were reasonably safe during those meetings, for guards stood along those passages. If danger threatened, if the enemies led by traitors forced their way inside, all the lights were quickly extinguished, and everyone sought safety in flight. Those Christians knew the way in this labyrinth of underground passages very well!

Calmly the guide walks on. The man has done this so often that he has become used to it. It is not new to him. He shows visitors around every day. At last, our guide pauses at a steep staircase. We all follow him up the stairs, leaving the eery darkness behind us.

Just a few more steps, and we are outside, blinking in the intense sunlight.

The guide receives his payment and departs with a brief greeting. We also leave, deeply impressed with all we have seen. Those Christians sacrificed so much for their faith!

We don't need to hide away in catacombs. We may peacefully go to church without fear of persecution or danger, where the sun shines through the tall windows.

What a difference between then and now!

Do you appreciate that?

Or do you go to church unwillingly?

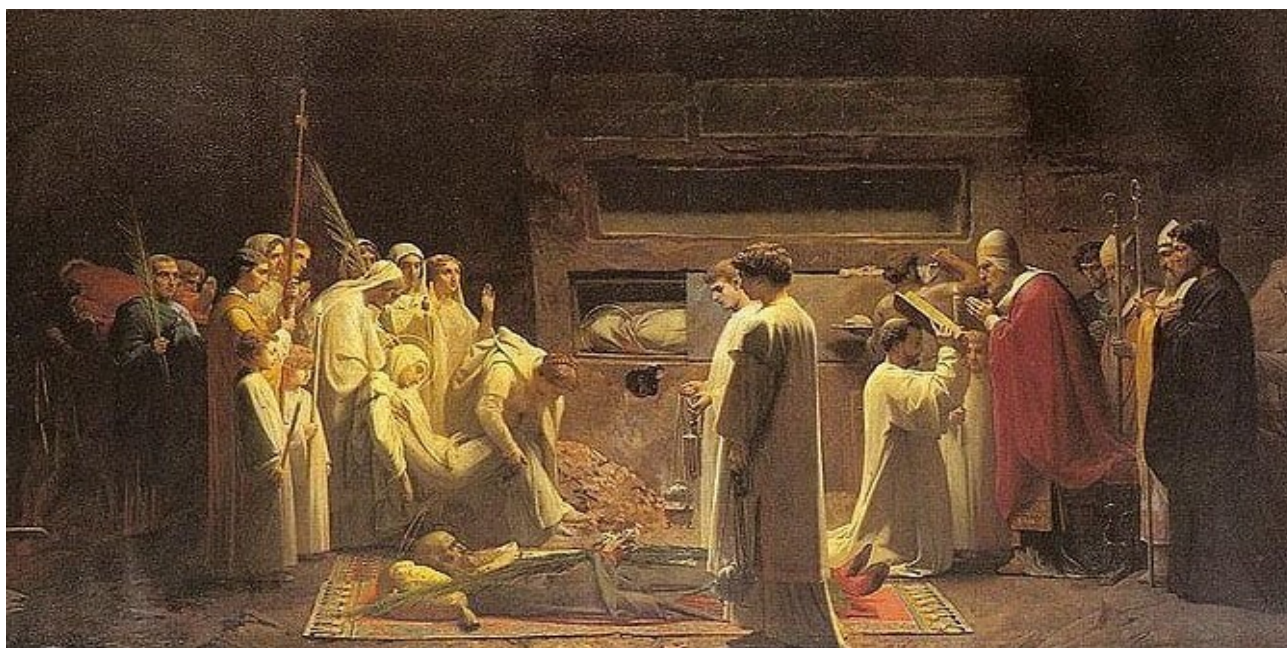
Will those thousands of martyrs testify against us on judgment day?

QUESTIONS

1. What are catacombs?
2. What is a maze?
3. What were the advantages of the catacombs as hiding places for the early Christians?
4. Why were the early Christians so insistent on writing various inscriptions in memory of the dead?
5. Why was the Lord's Supper celebrated daily?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why do we oppose the custom of cremation wherever and whenever it is possible to bury the dead?
2. Jesus has sanctified the grave for His people. What do we mean by this expression?
3. Read Amos 2. What was one of the reasons why God would punish Moab? How does this show that cremation is wrong whenever burial is possible?
4. Why does the Church Order specify that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated approximately four times a year?



The Martyrs in the Catacombs. Painter: Jules Eugene Lenepveu.