

Many believers wonder whether it's right to observe the 40-day memorial after someone dies, or to visit graves to pray or perform rituals. These practices may feel respectful, but are they biblical? Let's explore their origins and see what Scripture says.

1. The Origin of the 40 - Day Memorial

The tradition of the 40-day memorial did not begin with Christianity. It actually comes from ancient Egyptian practices. When a notable person (like a king) died, the Egyptians would embalm the body for 40 days—applying preserving substances daily to prevent decay. After 40 days, the body would be wrapped and placed in a special coffin designed to last for centuries.

The Bible describes how Joseph, while living in Egypt, followed this Egyptian custom when his father Jacob (Israel) died:

Genesis 50:2-3

“Then Joseph directed the physicians in his service to embalm his father Israel. So the physicians embalmed him, taking a full forty days, for that was the time required for embalming.”

And the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.”

Important note: this was not an Israelite practice—it was Egyptian. Joseph used it because he had lived most of his life in Egypt and adapted to its customs. But after God gave the Law through Moses, embalming and similar rituals were never commanded among God’s people.

Yes, the use of perfume or spices (like myrrh and aloes) was practiced for honoring the dead (see John 19:39), but there’s no biblical instruction to do this for 40 days, or as part of a spiritual ritual.

2. How the Tradition Entered Christianity

Centuries later, some began to associate the 40-day memorial with the 40 days Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. Based on this, a belief developed that a person’s soul roams the earth for 40 days before going to its final destination.

This idea led to the belief that prayers and rituals offered during

these 40 days could influence the fate of the deceased—helping them reach heaven or avoid hell. Some people feel guilty if they don't participate, thinking they've failed their loved ones spiritually.

3. What Does the Bible Actually Teach About Death?

The Bible clearly teaches that when a person dies, their eternal destiny is immediately sealed. There is no waiting period and no second chance after death.

Hebrews 9:27

“Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...”

Luke 16:22-23 (The story of Lazarus and the rich man)

“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was

buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up...

In both examples, the souls of the dead immediately went to their final destinations—paradise or torment. There is no biblical evidence of a soul wandering for 40 days.

Moreover, Jesus' 40 days after resurrection were not the actions of a spirit or ghost. He had a glorified, physical body (Luke 24:39), and His tomb was empty—not because His spirit left, but because He was alive.

Luke 24:39

“Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

So, equating Jesus' post-resurrection appearances with 40-day soul wandering is theologically inaccurate and misleading.

4. Should Christians Participate in 40-Day Memorials?

The 40-day memorial is not a biblical command or Christian requirement—it's a cultural practice. Participating in it as a spiritual ritual (to benefit the dead) is not supported by Scripture.

That said, if you're invited to such a gathering by family or friends who don't know the truth yet, you can choose to attend out of love—but do so with wisdom. Don't participate in rituals for the dead. Instead, use the opportunity to show the love of Christ and, when possible, share the hope of eternal life in Jesus.

5. What About Visiting Graves?

Visiting graves is not wrong in itself. It can be a sign of respect, remembrance, and maintaining order (just like caring for a garden or home). However, visiting graves for the purpose of praying to the dead, seeking their blessing, or trying to change their eternal fate is unbiblical.

Deuteronomy 18:10–12 strongly warns against communicating with the dead:

“Let no one be found among you... who practices divination or sorcery... or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord...”

Our prayers are to be directed to God alone, not the departed.

Our hope is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who conquered death and offers eternal life to all who believe in Him—now, not 40 days later.

John 11:25-26

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’”

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