

The Man Who Honored the King's Son

The Cross (Part 19)

Mark 15:40-47 (Mt.27:55-61; Lk.23:48) 3/11/2023

Why do all four gospels make such a point about the details of Jesus burial? His death matters, his resurrection matters, but why is his burial so important? And what are the implications for us? Does it matter what happens to a dead body?

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Harmony

John 19:30 When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. 31 Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. 32 The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. 33 But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. 35 The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. 36 These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," 37 and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

Luke 23:27 A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. 28 Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'" 30 Then "they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" 31 For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

John 19:25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," 27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. 28 Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." 29 A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. 30 When he had received the drink,

Matthew 27:55 Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

57 As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. 58 Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. 59 Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60 and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

Mark 15:40 Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. 41 In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

42 It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. 44 Pilate was amazed to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. 45 When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. 46 So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

Luke 23:48 When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. 49 But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

50 Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, 51 who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. 52 Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. 53 Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. 54 It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. 55 The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. 56 Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

John 19:31 Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. 32 The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. 33 But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. 35 The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. 36 These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," 37 and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

38 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. 39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. 40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. 41 At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. 42 Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

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Introduction

Transition from Humiliation to Glorification

Let's start with another trivia question you can use to stump your friends. We all understand the pattern of Philippians 2—Jesus humbled himself, then God super-exalted him to the highest place. Here's the question: When was the transition? When was the shift from humiliation to exaltation?

If you asked me that two weeks ago I would have said, "That's easy—his resurrection." But that's wrong. His exaltation began with his burial. The transition began the moment he died. Think about it—from that moment on, nothing dishonorable happens to him. God immediately vindicates Jesus by tearing the curtain of the temple. The man in charge at the scene affirms he is a righteous man and the Son of God. And he given an honorable burial—which is remarkable, because a major component of crucifixion was to deprive the person of that.

The whole point of crucifixion was maximum degradation, and that didn't end at death. In that culture, if you really wanted to punish someone, you wouldn't just kill him. You'd kill him and let his body be eaten by dogs. Or let him be buried in a place he despises. That would punish his descendants for generations to come.

So when the Romans crucified someone, they would just leave them hanging cross and just let all their friends and family watch their body decompose and see the birds picking at their eyeballs until the flesh became so rotten in fell to the ground and became food for maggots and filthy scavengers. And they made it illegal to bury crucifixion victims without special permission.

In the vicinity of Jerusalem, leaving bodies on crosses could be politically volatile, so sometimes they would often throw all the bodies in a shallow mass grave.

And yet as determined as they were to inflict the worst possible punishment and humiliation on Jesus, he ends up with an honorable burial. Why? If the humiliation aspect was such an important part of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, why didn't all that happen to Jesus?

It almost did. Verse 42 brings Jesus right to the brink of that fate. But things turned at the last minute—why? Because when Jesus said, "It is finished," it was finished. The Father said, "That's enough," and he put an end to the dishonor.¹

¹ This had been God's plan as prophesied in Isaiah 53:9.

Isaiah 53:9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.

How must that have sounded to the original readers? The wicked and the rich? The rest of Isaiah 53 makes sense—but in his death and burial he will be associated with the wicked and the rich? Scholars are so befuddled about what that might have meant to the original readers that most of them just conclude it must be a typo. Another theory is that "wicked" and "rich" are parallel because it is often rich oppressors in power who are the persecutors of God's people. This is possible, but the construction still seems odd—with the wicked and with the rich. I don't know of any other place where rich oppressors are described

We usually don't give much attention to Jesus' burial, but if you look at how much space the gospel writers devote to it, that clues us in to the fact that it's important. When Paul sums up the entire gospel in a single sentence, he includes the burial.

1 Corinthians 15:3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day.

The burial is important, so we're going to look at that today. Mark's going to tell us exactly what happened, but first he wants us to know about the man who did it and the women who witnessed it. He starts with the women.

The Unconventional Witnesses

Loyal Followers Keep Their Distance

Mark 15:40 Some women were watching from a distance.

Who were they? They were some of Jesus' most loyal disciples.

41 In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs.²

They ministered to Jesus the same way the angels did after his fasting in the wilderness (same word). They supported him financially and made his whole ministry possible.

Female Disciples

They were long-term followers, going all the way back to Jesus' Galilean ministry.

41 In Galilee these women had followed him.³

That's remarkable because rabbis never had female disciples. But Jesus didn't care about cultural taboos when they were in conflict with God's will.

From a Distance

So these women were devoted followers, they were there when the male disciples were in hiding, courageous, and yet even these women are keeping their distance.

40 Some women were watching from a distance.

That's the identical Greek phrase from when Peter followed Jesus at a distance after the arrest—*apo makrothen*. That phrase comes right out of Psalm 38:11. The psalmist is describing his abject misery, and part of what's making him so miserable is the fact that none of his friends will have anything to do with him.

quite like that, without any reference to them actually doing something wicked. In this case it simply says he was "given" a grave.

But if we can accept that there are some prophecies that are only understandable after they have been fulfilled, then it makes perfect sense. The intention was for Jesus to be buried as a criminal, but instead he received an honorable burial at the hands of a rich man because Jesus wanted his Son to be honored in his death. The time of humiliation was over.

² The word translated "cared for" is usually translated "to serve" or "minister." It's *diakoneo*—we get the word deacon from it. The first time it appears in Mark is in ch.1 where angels come and minister to Jesus at the end of his 40 day fast (Mark 1:13). It's also used of Peter's mother-in-law when she started serving everyone after Jesus healed her fever (1:31). And the one other place it's used in Mark is in ch.10 where Jesus said, "The Son of man didn't come to be ministered to, but to minister."

Mark 10:43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.

One of the ways they served him was to provide his financial needs.

Luke 8:3 Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

³ This large crowd of women and a bunch of men as well had followed Jesus from Galilee. They're the ones who were shouting "hosannah" at the Triumphal Entry.

Psalm 38:11 My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stand off at a distance.

Mark quotes that psalm to describe the abandonment of Jesus by his closest friends and family in the moment of his greatest need.

Witnesses

On the other hand, as sad as it is that they want to keep their distance, at least these women were there, unlike the men. Mark, who normally doesn't name names, tells a lot about these ladies—

- Their names
- kids' names
- where they were from
- their relationship to Jesus
- how long they had known Jesus

Why the whole dossier?

All that information is important because of the roll they played in the gospel story. What did they do?

40 Some women were watching

47 they saw

Mark 16:4 when they looked up, they saw

5 they saw

The identity of these women is crucial because they are the witnesses. We can title this first point The Unconventional Witnesses. I'll explain the unconventional part in a second, but for now the point is, they serve as eyewitnesses.

Mark mentions their names three times—once at the crucifixion, again at the burial, and again at the empty tomb. They were the witnesses of the three events that God wants us to have absolute, rock-solid proof of.

They didn't have the courage to be at Jesus' side, but at least they come close enough to see what happened. Without these women, we wouldn't have an eye-witness record of the crucifixion, burial, and the angel at the empty tomb.⁴

For most of what Jesus said and did, the gospel writers aren't interested in providing proof. They are more focused on showing the meaning of his actions. But when it comes to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, there is a huge focus on historical proof.

One example of that is all the details Mark gives us about these women. It's important to publish their names and identifying info so people could go and verify the accounts firsthand. That's why Mark gives all the details. It's important that he establish that they knew Jesus well, so we know there's no chance of mistaken identity. That they cared a lot about Jesus so we know they aren't casual observers who might not be paying close attention. If you follow a man on a journey like that and finance the whole thing with your own money, you're a casual observer.

All this to establish proof of death. And not only do we have these witnesses, we'll read in a minute how God created a situation where Pilate has to conduct an investigation to verify that Jesus was dead.

God knew people would come along with theories about maybe Jesus didn't really die. Maybe he just swooned on the cross, they saw his eyes were closed, assumed he was dead, then later he came to and walked away. That's ruled about by the testimony of the Centurion

⁴ Similarly, it may well be that it is from Joseph that all the information came about the trial before the Sanhedrin.

before Pilate in v.45. A Centurion was a trained killing machine. Few human beings in history have been more proficient at killing than a Roman Centurion. And they weren't idiots. They didn't think someone was dead just because they closed their eyes.

The Muslim religion is another example. They teach Jesus survived the crucifixion and the guy they buried was a body double.

God knew those kinds of things would come up, so he went out of his way to provide proof of death, proof of burial, and proof of resurrection.

God's Proof, Not Ours

It's sad that the men Jesus had chosen to be his witnesses and tell the whole world about the cross, weren't even there to see it. Their whole job was to testify to the world about the cross and they missed it. But we thank God that these women were there so the Apostles could at least get the information from them.

Proof is important to God. He never asks us to go on blind faith. He always provides compelling, abundant proof to give us a rock-solid foundation for what he calls us to believe.

He provides proof, but usually not the kind of proof we think we need. God says, "Here's the proof," and if we say, "I'm not persuaded by that evidence God. Do this other thing; then I'll be convinced"—God doesn't cater to that. He gives good evidence, even if it's not the evidence we find most compelling.

In this case, female eyewitnesses, which is excellent evidence, but not in that culture. Women were considered so unreliable they weren't even allowed to testify in court. If you committed a crime and the only people who saw it were women, you're off the hook. That's why I titled this first point The Unconventional Witnesses.

Once again this rules out the idea that the disciples made all this up. If they were making something up, one thing you can say for sure is they never would have made the primary witnesses female. If you said, "Guess what! There was a resurrection!"

"How do you know for sure? Who saw it?"

"A group of emotional women."

They would say, "Oh brother" and walk away.

But God doesn't accommodate himself to our hangups. He just provides the best form of proof and it's up to us to adjust our attitudes about what's proof and what isn't.

"But what if there were people back then who remained unconvinced because God didn't use a form of proof that was more accepted in that culture?" They would miss out on eternal life. That's what you get for buying into dumb cultural attitudes.

The Names

So what are the names? The first, as usual, is **Mary Magdalene**. Luke 8:2 says Jesus drove 7 demons out of her and she became a very important disciple.⁵ All four gospel writers mention her as the chief witness of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Next was another Mary.

40 ... **Mary the mother of James the younger⁶ and of Joses.**

That's probably Jesus' mother, since Mark made a point earlier of telling us Jesus' brothers were named James and Joses (Mark 3:31).⁷ So this is a woman who *really* knew Jesus. I don't think his mother would have been fooled by a body double.

⁵ Popular tradition has somehow come up with the idea that she had been a prostitute, but there's nothing in the Bible or in history to support that idea.

⁶ Lit. "James the less." It could refer to his stature or his age. It is possible that "James the younger" is meant to differentiate him from James the son of Zebedee and brother of John, whose mother Salome is also mentioned in v. 40 (Mt.27:56).

⁷ It would be quite the coincidence if one of the witnesses of Jesus' burial had the same name as Jesus' mother and had two sons with the same names as Jesus' brothers, and that Mark would mention all their names without expecting the reader to

And the third woman is Salome. Matthew tells us she's the mother of two of the Apostles (James and John), which means she's the one who asked Jesus to give her sons the chief positions at his right and left in the kingdom.

These women witnessed the death of Jesus, and they also witnessed his burial, so let's move on to that.

The Unlikely Hero

What Happened?

If one of the main purposes of crucifixion was to dishonor the body, how was that avoided in Jesus' case? Think about what a miracle this was. The Roman Empire makes the decision that a man will be discredited and disgraced in his death. The ruling powers in the nation of Israel are in full agreement. The Roman Empire and the nation of Israel join forces to denigrate the body of a man they just executed. And it's about to happen. That sun sets, and it will happen, and that sun is getting real close to that horizon. It looks hopeless.

So what stopped it? Who stepped in? The disciples? No. The women? No, they're cowards too. It's the last person you would ever imagine.

Unlikely Candidate

Last time we saw the awesome power of the cross to claim just about the most unlikely human heart you could imagine—the Centurion in charge of the crucifixion. I say “just about” the most unlikely because now we're going to see an even less likely one. We've seen the unconventional witnesses, now let's look at the unlikely hero. If there's one person you would say is even less likely to be won over to Jesus' side than the leader of the death squad, it would be this man. And yet at the last second he steps forward in heroic courage and prevents Jesus' body from being desecrated.

You can think of this closing paragraph of Mark 15 as the sequel to the parable of the vineyard. That was the story Jesus told about how the landowner kept sending servants to his vineyard and the tenants kept beating and killing them. Finally he sends his own son, and they murder him and throw his body outside the walls.

That's how that parable ended, but here we get a sequel. In the sequel, just before a pack of dogs begins devouring the body, an unlikely hero appears, drives the dogs away, and honors the son with an elaborate burial. And you say, “Who is this guy who appeared out of nowhere?” And the camera zooms in and you find out ... it was one of the tenants!

Member of the Council

Mark 15:43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council ...

The Council is the Sanhedrin—the Jewish Supreme Court that had just sentenced Jesus to death. There are plenty of bad guys in Mark's gospel, but no one is worse these people. The chief priests, the teachers of the law, the religious officials who were constantly opposing Je-

make any connection.

Many commentators would disagree. They argue that if this was Jesus' mother, Mark would have said that. But if you look back to Mark's earlier references to Jesus' mother, you can understand why Mark *wouldn't* say it that way. Jesus distanced himself from his blood relationships, including his relationship to Mary. When Mary and his brothers said Jesus was out of his mind, someone said, “Jesus, your mother is outside looking for you” and he said, “Who is my mother? Whoever does God's will is my mother and brother and sister.” And now the Jesus has died, that distance from his natural family was even more profound. Just a few verses earlier we got the final word about Jesus in the theological climax of the book: “Surely this man was the Son of God.”

Another objection is that Jesus' other brothers (Judas and Simon) aren't mentioned here. But it may be that Judas and Simon aren't mentioned because they were not known to Mark's readers in Rome and James and Joses were.

sus, they are the worst of the worst in Mark. We saw that every category of mankind is implicated in the death of Jesus, but no one as bad as the Jewish Sanhedrin. They were the most intentional, the most vicious, the strongest driving force in the murder of Jesus. The gospel has extended hope for hardened sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, Roman soldiers, pagan foreigners, even people controlled by demons. But up to this point, there's been almost nothing but condemnation for these men.⁸ They were rich, proud, self-righteous hypocrites.

And now you have this prominent member of that council. If you've been reading the book, this sounds like this is Darth Vader walking onto the scene.

But, amazingly, he's a good guy.

Waiting for the Kingdom

Luke says he was a good and righteous man.⁹ But listen to how Mark says that same thing.

43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God.

What an interesting way to tell us he's godly—waiting for the kingdom. Waiting refers to eager expectation—he can't wait.

But wait a second—weren't all the Jews waiting for the kingdom?¹⁰ They were waiting for their idea of the kingdom. This is that little life/big life thing again. They were eagerly anticipating their idea of a kingdom, which was basically what they had already minus Rome. And maybe some more prosperity. Whatever was needed to fix up this little life the way they wanted it.

That's a lot different from what Jesus had in mind when he taught them to pray, "Our Father ... your kingdom come." Or what the people were shouting at the Triumphal Entry: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David." Jesus preached about God's kingdom—the big, eternal kingdom where the next world breaks into this one. It's the kingdom Jesus described in the parables, where all the people are at peace with God and live by the standards of the Sermon on the Mount. Joseph was waiting for everything Jesus has preached about to come to fruition.

Time Crunch

So let's watch how this unfolded. We get the setup in v.42 and the very first word puts us in a time crunch. The literal translation is:

42 And already evening having approached ...

Evening refers to sundown. Remember, Mark divides the crucifixion day into 4 equal segments, like the 4 quarters of a ball game.¹¹ NFL quarters are 15 minutes each; these are 3 hours each. First quarter: the events from sunrise until they nail him to the cross. Second quarter: first 3 hours on the cross when everyone mocked him. Third quarter: three hours of darkness. At the end of the third quarter, Jesus dies.

The 4th quarter is about what happened to his body, but Mark begins this segment by telling us the 4th quarter is almost over. That's a problem because for Jews, sundown marks the beginning of the next day. So as soon as that sun sets, it's the Sabbath, which means you can't

⁸ The only exception is the scribe in ch.12 who was not far from the kingdom.

⁹ Luke 23:50–51.

¹⁰ Every pious Jew prayed regularly for the kingdom to come in the synagogue prayers.

¹¹ In verse 1 it starts at sunrise, then they crucify him at the third hour (v.25), then darkness descends from the 6th hour to the 9th hour (v.33). As sundown approaches, Joseph comes (v.42). Sunrise to sundown was divided into 12 even segments they called hours. Sunrise was zero and sunset was the 12th hour. So the length of each hour would be shorter in the winter than the summer. But there were always 12 "hours" of daylight.

do the work involved with burying a body. And waiting until after the Sabbath isn't an option because leaving a corpse out overnight would desecrate the land.

Deuteronomy 21:22 If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, 23 you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

There was a time in David's reign when God stopped answering the people's prayers because of some bodies that hadn't been buried. So David gave them a proper burial and God started answering prayers again (2 Sam 21:12–14).

It's almost sundown and Jesus is still on the cross. If he's left on the cross, not only will Jesus' body be desecrated, but it will also defile the land. If they throw his body in a shallow mass grave, it would be hard to prove a resurrection. People would just assume the disciples stole the body or it got lost in the shuffle.

So Mark the storyteller starts the account of the burial with a time crunch. It's like a novel that begins with the words, "We're almost out of time!"

But why? Why are we already close to the end of the 4th quarter? He's been dead since 3:00. Why hasn't someone from his family or friends done something about his body?

Well, for one thing it was illegal to bury the body of someone crucified for treason unless you got special permission. It wasn't unheard of for permission to be granted to family or friends, but only if they asked. And asking permission would identify you as a sympathizer, and that could land you in jail ... or worse. And no one close to Jesus had the courage. But at the last minute, one man summons the courage.

Bold Move

42 And already evening having approached, since it was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath) 43 Joseph of Arimathea ... went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

This could be translated, "He dared to ask Pilate for the body" or "He summoned the courage to ask for the body." Unlike the Apostles and Jesus' family and even the women, this man steps forward with great courage. And he goes right to Pilate.

Not only is he risking being branded a sympathizer by Rome, but think of what he will face from his own council. How do you think they're going to like this? They had already decreed that anyone who acknowledged Jesus was the Messiah would be excommunicated (John 9:22).

Joseph the Coward

And that had intimidated Joseph. And if you're wondering why we never heard about this guy earlier, here's why:

John 19:38 ... Joseph of Arimathea ... was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews.

He was a coward. And he was a coward, according to John 12:42-43, because he loved praise from men more than praise from God.

And remember, Jesus said if anyone you're ashamed of him, Jesus will be ashamed of you at the Second Coming. But after Jesus' death Joseph's cowardice gives way to astonishing courage. More courage than all the best and bravest of the disciples.

Joseph is another example of the transforming power of the cross. First the Roman Centurion, now a member of the Sanhedrin. God is capturing the hearts from among the last people

you would imagine. He gives new life to a pagan, then he gives courage to a cowardly secret disciple.

John 12:32 But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.

That's the power of the cross.

Critical Theory

Joseph was rich, prestigious, and powerful. What does the Bible usually say about people in those categories? Jesus said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus said the prestigious people—people who are highly honored in this world will be last in the kingdom of God. Jesus pronounced all kinds of curses on the political powers in Israel. Joseph was in all three of those categories.

But the issue for God is never what category you're in. That's one reason Marxism and Critical Theory are so unbiblical. And if you're not familiar with Critical Theory, the popular term for it now is "wokeness." The main idea behind Critical Theory (or wokeness) is that everyone should be treated one way or another based on their *category*, not based on their individual situation. If you're a member of an oppressed category, then you should be treated as oppressed, whether that's true in your individual situation or not. And if you're a member of an oppressor category, you should be treated as an evil oppressor even if you've never oppressed a flea. That's the primary, driving idea behind wokeness. And it's a key component of Marxism.

And I bring it up, not to get political, but to show how antithetical that is to the kingdom of God. In the Bible, rich, prestigious, powerful people are usually in the category of evil oppressors. And in the gospels, the members of the Sanhedrin are the worst category there is. Joseph is in all those categories, and yet he is shown to be a good guy—even better than the best of the Apostles.

God uses the lowly and poor instead of the rich and prominent. But God has a use for them too. In this case, the fact that he was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin may have been the reason Pilate granted his request. And if he hadn't been rich, he wouldn't have had access to a stone tomb that could be secured. Joseph might have had the same realization as Esther, that God had placed him in a strategic spot "for such a time as this."

Some people have assumed God has a bias in favor of the poor. Not true. Each person stands before God as an individual, not as a member of a class. Your categories don't define you—only your heart. And we should resist every trace of the wokeness, Marxist influences that are being pushed so hard in our culture because they are blatant injustice, which God hates.

The Unexpected Reversal

Joseph Before Pilate

Okay, so we've seen the unconventional witnesses, the unlikely hero, now let's look at the burial. We'll call this the unexpected reversal. Instead of being picked apart by unclean animals or thrown in a mass grave with criminals, here's what happens:

43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

Joseph stands outside the door just before they call him in. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes—but then the gruesome images of Jesus' flogging flash through his mind and startles his eyes open. Sweat drips down his face, and he tries to control the trembling in his hands. He

knows this could be his last moments of freedom, or of life. A soldier motions for him to enter. He breathes a quick prayer for strength and steps in before the governor.

“Your excellency. It’s almost sundown. As you know, if Jesus’ body is left up overnight, the whole land will be under God’s curse. Allow your servant to dispose of the body.”

Pilate stands and walks toward him. Joseph braces himself for a barrage of questions about his motives, whether he is here representing the Sanhedrin, what his plans are for the body. But instead, Pilate looks at one of the soldiers. “He’s dead?” The soldier nods. “Bring me the Centurion!”

44 Pilate was amazed to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died.

The man who stood directly in front of Jesus, facing him, and who was so moved by the way he breathed his last that it convinced him Jesus was the Son of God, is now questioned about whether Jesus was dead. Of course, his life would be on the line if he gave a false report at this point. But there’s no need. “I assure you, sir, he is quite dead. And we put a spear through his heart just to make sure. He’s been dead for some time now.”

45 When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the corpse to Joseph.

So with a wave of Pilate’s hand, Joseph takes his exit. Outside the palace his whole staff and several friends are waiting—along with another member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

“We have permission. We have to move fast. Go!”

They all have their assigned tasks. Nicodemus takes care of buying the aloes and myrrh for preparing the body.

46 So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took him down, wrapped him in the linen, and placed him in a tomb cut out of rock.

They bring the cross down slowly, carefully. It requires some tools to pull his wrists and feet off the spikes, but they’re careful. They carry the body to a creek. It takes quite a bit of scrubbing to get the body clean. They dab him dry then begin meticulously wrapping him. They have enough spices and oils to keep the smell under control for several weeks. A few times Joseph has to pause as the tears overtake him. This just seems so ... final.

46 Joseph ... wrapped him in the linen, and placed him in a tomb cut out of rock.

The wealthy buried their dead in caves. Sometimes very large ones, with shelves to handle 10 or 20 bodies.

Isaiah 53:9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.

Honoring the Son

According to John 19:39, Nicodemus bought 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint his body.¹² That is a major splurge. Every detail of Jesus’ burial showed him the utmost honor. Extravagant embalming, cared for by rich, prominent, powerful, prestigious men. And Acts 2 points out that God even timed the resurrection the way he did to make sure Jesus’ body didn’t undergo the indignity of decay. The shame is over. God sees to it that his Son is laid in the ground with honor.

46 ... Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.¹³

¹² Clearly these are men who did not believe the resurrection was going to happen.

¹³ This would keep animals out and the smell in. We know from other gospels the tomb was sealed and guarded by the Romans to keep the disciples from stealing the body and claiming he rose from the dead.

Honoring a Body

Of all the memorial services I've seen, there's one I'll never forget. It was 40 years ago—1983. My cousin Kenny, whom I idolized, died at age 22. I was 16, and the thing I remember was his wake.

I just stood there the longest time and looked at his face. I couldn't take my eyes off him, and someone noticed and came alongside me. I said, "I can't believe that's him." And this person tried to comfort me by saying, "It's not him. Kenny's in heaven. That's just his body."

That's an attitude I've carried with me ever since. Once you're dead, your body is basically irrelevant until the resurrection. When your spirit goes to heaven, your body is just a blob of matter, nothing more.

But if that's the case, what did it matter what happened to Jesus' corpse? Clearly, it did matter. Jesus' body was not just a meaningless blob of matter.

Look at v.46. In verse 43, it says Joseph asked for the body. In verse 45, it says Pilate gave Joseph the corpse. Both of those words, body and corpse, are in the neuter gender in the Greek, which means the appropriate pronoun to use would be "it." So in verse 46, when Joseph takes the corpse down, the proper grammar would be, "So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took it down, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb. But that's not what Mark says. Instead, he uses the masculine pronoun each time.

46 So Joseph ... took *him* down, wrapped *him* in the linen, and placed *him* in a tomb.

He doesn't refer to the corpse as a an "it," but as a "him." Pagans very often burn bodies of loved ones because they believe the spirit is good, but it's trapped inside the physical body which is bad. Burning the body releases the spirit to a much better condition.

The biblical model is burial because the body is good, part of the image of God. God made us unified beings. Yes, the spirit is separated from the body at death, but that separation is like a tear in a seamless garment.

And it's temporary. We won't be whole again until the resurrection. When I was standing there looking at Kenny at the wake, I was looking at Kenny. And the honor that was being shown to his body in order to show honor to him as appropriate.

When the women came to the empty tomb, the angel said, "He's not here. He's risen!" But when they were preparing Jesus' body for burial, there was no angel saying, "Why are you wasting those spices? He's not here. He's in paradise." Jesus was in paradise, but honoring his body was absolutely the right thing to do to honor him.

Proof of Burial

So Joseph and his guys get that stone in place just in time before the sun sets. He turns around and leans against the rock wall to catch his breath, and guess who he sees, standing there watching.

47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

These women—it's like they don't want to let Jesus out of their sight. They witnessed his death and now his burial. That's important because millions of us are banking on the fact that these women didn't go to the wrong tomb on Sunday morning. No chance of that.

Conclusion: Are You Waiting for the Kingdom?

The main purpose of this passage is to establish the credibility of the witnesses and to show how the Father honored his Son after his death. But I think there's another purpose. All four gospels not only mention Joseph by name, but give us details about him. God wants our attention on what this man was like, and I'm convinced that's because he wants us to be inspired to follow his example.

No matter who you are, the power of the cross can change everything. Joseph went from the worst of the disciples to the best. And Mark's only explanation for why was that he was waiting for the kingdom of God.

Are you waiting for the kingdom of God? Pilate certainly wasn't. He's a good contrast with Joseph in this passage. When it says **Pilate was amazed** in v.44—that's the same word we've seen throughout the gospel of people's reactions to Jesus. And we found it's always an inadequate reaction. People saw Jesus's miracles, they were amazed, then went about their business. It didn't change them. That's Pilate. He should have responded like the Centurion and Joseph. Instead, he's amazed, shrugs his shoulders, and gets on with his life.

A lot of people claim to be searching for the truth but they have no intention of actually finding it and committing to it. They pride themselves on being on an intellectual journey, but it never arrives anywhere. "What do you believe?" "Oh, I don't know. Still searching." They'll entertain all kinds of ideas, but they have no interest in actually coming to a conclusion, because if you never land anywhere you don't have to live anywhere. You don't have to commit to anything.

People like that will come across the truth and walk right past it without even noticing it, like Pilate. But not Joseph. He was truly, genuinely waiting for the true kingdom of God, however God defined it, and so when Jesus came along, he said, "There it is. I've found the kingdom of God." He looked at Jesus' mutilated corpse, with eyes to see and said, "Now *there's* a king." One mark of someone who's waiting for the kingdom of God is they embrace it when they see it even when it shows up in a form totally different from what they expected.

And what does embracing it look like? It looks like risking your career, his reputation, even your life if necessary to show honor to the King of that kingdom. If you're waiting for the kingdom of God, the King's honor means more to you than anything else in life, including life itself. You would risk everything just to show one last honor to his dead body if it came to that. And if that sounds hard in the moment, I'll just leave it up to your imagination to consider what kind of reward do you think God the Father is lavishing right now on the man who risked everything to give his Son an honorable burial?

Summary

The transition from humiliation to glory began the moment Jesus died. The women are established as credible witnesses of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (God provides his proof, not what we prefer). Crucifixion was meant to humiliate even after death, and that was about to happen as sunset approached. But in the nick of time, the most unlikely man steps forward in courage. He was waiting for the kingdom of God, so he risked everything to honor the King.