

Confessing Christ in His Burial

Mark 15:42–47
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In last week's text, Mark wrote, *And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost* (v. 37). He died. Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the centurion in charge of his execution declared that he was the Son of God.

But what happened after that? The Romans weren't especially concerned for the bodies of executed criminals. In fact, they often left them rotting on the cross for days as a warning to everyone who passed by not to mess with Rome. And even when they took them down, they usually discarded them like trash. Gehenna, the garbage dump that Jesus often used to illustrate hell, was where they would have tossed their bodies in Jerusalem. It was a place literally where the worm never died and the fire was never quenched. Another possibility is that the family of a crucified felon could ask for the body of its loved one to give him a decent burial, though we know of only one instance of this happening.

According to the gospels, none of Jesus' relatives stepped up to claim his body. The only relative we know of who witnessed the crucifixion was the apostle John, but it's unclear when he was actually present. He seems to have left with Jesus' mother before he died. He wrote, *And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home* (John 19:27). Yet, he also returned later and watched as the soldier threw the spear into Jesus' side. He wrote, *And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe* (John 19:35).

Instead, someone else — a man named Joseph of Arimathaea — assumed this responsibility, and that's what we plan to look at today.

An Honorable Councilor

Who was Joseph of Arimathaea? The words *of Arimathaea* suggest that either he or his family lived in Ramah — the village where Samuel the prophet was born, lived, died and was buried. Ramah was just a few miles from Jerusalem.

Mark also wrote that Joseph was *an honourable counsellor*, i.e., a prominent and well-respected member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court — the very body that had just condemned Jesus and sent him to Pilate for trial. This makes us wonder whether he had a part in the

proceedings of the previous night. But before we assume he did, let's consider something else that we know about him.

You see, Joseph wasn't just a respected member of the Sanhedrin. Matthew identified him as one of *Jesus' disciples* (Matt. 27:57), i.e., one whom Jesus personally trained in the faith. According to Luke, *he was a good man, and a just* (Luke 23:50), who also *waited for the kingdom of God* (cf. Luke 23:51). He was like Simeon, the man who greeted the baby Jesus when Mary and Joseph presented him for circumcision. Simeon waited for the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25). We also wait. According to the apostle Paul, *we wait for the hope of righteousness by faith* (Gal. 5:5), and for God's Son to come from heaven (1 Thess. 1:10), and many other things.

Concerning his part in Jesus' trial, Luke said explicitly that Joseph of Arimathaea *had not consented to the counsel and deed of his fellow councilors* (Luke 23:51). This might mean that he attended the trial but didn't say anything because he was afraid. According to John, he kept his relationship with Jesus a *secret for fear of the Jews* (John 19:38). But it could also mean, as a few commentators suppose, that Joseph wasn't even there. He never showed up because he knew it was nothing but a sham. Now, why would commentators say this? It's because Mark 14:64 explicitly says that *all [members of the Sanhedrin who were present for Jesus' trial] condemned him to be guilty of death* (cf. Mark 15:1). This would have included Joseph if he had been there.

Whichever of these two scenarios is right, it's clear that Jesus' death changed Joseph. His cowardice turned into an exceptional boldness. In verse 43 of our text, the word translated *boldly* literally means 'having found courage.' And Joseph would have needed a lot of courage to go to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. Pilate might have thought that he was just another insurrectionist and ordered his execution. Or the Jews might have discovered that he went to Pilate only to expel him from his position on the Sanhedrin and excommunicate him. After all, the Jews had already made it known that excommunication would be the penalty for following Jesus. John 9:22 says, *The Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue.* Other members of the Sanhedrin who followed Jesus, like Nicodemus, were also afraid to confess Jesus openly for the same reason. John 12:42 says, *Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue* (John 12:42).

Confessing Jesus Christ is rarely easy, but true believers must do it. We can't sit on the sidelines. Unless we confess him, he says plainly that he will not confess us before his Father. This means that we have to unite with his body, the church. And the good news is that he gives us the grace to do so and the assurance of his presence and favor when we do, no matter how hard it may be.

Joseph had this grace. Verse 42 explains what happened. By the time Jesus died, it was already late in the day — 3 PM. The sabbath started at sunset or roughly 6 PM. Jesus had to be buried before sunset because the rules of the rabbis prohibited burial on the sabbath. So, Joseph rushed to Pilate and begged permission to bury him. Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus had already died, so he summoned the centurion — apparently the one who had just announced Jesus' divine sonship to the world — to confirm it. Pilate then gave Joseph the body.

Joseph, like Esther in the Old Testament, had come *for such a time as this* (Esth. 4:14). He was a rich man and buried Jesus in his own unused tomb (Matt. 27:57, 60). These two things shed light on Jesus' burial. Joseph's wealth meant that he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:9, viz., that the Messiah would make his grave with the rich. Joseph gave Jesus an honorable burial, which was especially remarkable after his shameful trial execution. He buried Jesus, as our catechism says, to show that he was really dead (Heid. Cat. 41). And he placed the Lord's body in a new tomb that had never seen decay. Instead of the grave corrupting him, he sanctified it for everyone who dies believing in him. He did it by rising again from the dead after just three days.

Joseph and Nicodemus

Verse 46 describes Jesus' burial. Joseph did what he could in the short time he had. He removed Jesus' body from the cross, wrapped it in expensive linen and laid it in a grave.

If we had only the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we might think Joseph did all of this by himself. But John wrote that someone else helped him. His account says, *And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury* (John 19:39–40).

For whatever reason, John seems to have had a special interest in Nicodemus. He told us in chapter 3 that Nicodemus had gone to Jesus by night to ask him about his miracles. Jesus used this to tell him he needed to be born again. Nicodemus' name appears again in the seventh chapter of John's gospel, where he took a stand for due process. John wrote, *Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?* (John 7:50–51). And Nicodemus appeared again in connection with Jesus' burial.

But why was John so interested in Nicodemus? Was he related to him? Did he impress John because his questions were out of character for a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews? No, I think John told us what interested him. In each of the three passages in which he mentioned Nicodemus, he

specifically identified him as the one who had gone to Jesus by night. John followed Nicodemus' journey of faith, i.e., how he went from a curious but ignorant inquirer in chapter 3, to taking a mild stand in defense of Jesus in chapter 7, to assisting Joseph with his burial in chapter 19. Like Joseph, Nicodemus' start was shaky at best, but the one thing that pulled them both out and gave them real spiritual strength was the death of Jesus Christ. It gave them commitment and purpose. It's how they came to understand that they couldn't watch Jesus from afar — interested but not really resolved to follow him. It taught them to take up their own crosses and follow the Savior of men. They had to confess him in his death because that alone was the only atoning sacrifice for their sins.

John's account also says that Nicodemus brought the myrrh and aloes necessary to prepare Jesus' body for burial. In fact, he brought a lot of spices: a hundred pounds worth, or approximately seventy-five pounds in our modern system of weights and measures. Instead of embalming corpses, the Jews covered them with precious ointments and fragrances before wrapping them in a shroud. This was to minimize the smell of decomposing flesh. Here the amount of spices that Nicodemus brought was what one might expect for a king's burial. He, no doubt, remembered that Jesus taught him about his kingdom when he first went to him by night.

The gospel of Jesus Christ turns men's priorities upside down. Jesus' disciples, all of whom boasted that they would never abandon him and insisted instead that they should be great in his kingdom, fled. But as soon as things got a little hot for them, they ran off. But with Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus, the opposite was true. Jesus' death drew them out of their cowardice and fear like a moth to a flame. And together they did for Jesus what no one else would do. They prepared him for burial.

These two men did for Jesus what we all do for the bodies of our deceased loved ones. Because we know they'll rise again when Jesus returns, we prepare their bodies for that glorious day by taking care of them. That Jesus planned to be in the tomb for a mere three days didn't matter. His body needed care because he would live again, just as he promised.

The last thing we want to look at today is, once again, the women in our text. Verse 47 says, *And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid.*

Okay, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where Joseph and Nicodemus placed Jesus' body. Why is this important? Why did they even bother to follow them? Luke explained this in his gospel: *And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment (Luke 23:55–56).* These women wanted to

know where Jesus was buried so they could go home, prepare the spices and ointments to anoint his face, and then honor Jesus after the Sabbath had ended, i.e., after his work was done. We'll say more about this next week.

But here, we need to note the intensity of the women's observation. They didn't just watch Joseph and Nicodemus take care of Jesus' body, as we might watch children playing in the yard. The Greek suggests that they scrutinized them for a long time, looking intently at what they were doing, even devoutly paying attention. Having followed Jesus from Galilee, they heard a lot of his teaching. Maybe they understood some things better than the disciples, or maybe not. But one thing is certain: they knew Jesus would eventually make it all clear to them. And so they watched and watched and watched. And in just a few hours, the answers to their questions would be clear.

The same women who taught us last week how to respond to Jesus' crucifixion now teach us how to respond to his burial. Their attitude wasn't indifference. They watched with a keen interest.

Are we watching? I don't mean merely that we're watching for the second coming, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: *Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober* (1 Thess. 5:6). Rather, I'm asking whether we're watching everything the Lord does in our lives to understand his purposes. Are we comparing what we see to his promises in the Bible? Paul exhorted the Corinthians, *Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong* (1 Cor. 16:13). So, read the Bible, meditate on its exceedingly great promises, commit large portions of it to memory, live by it, rely on its assurances of God's love for his people, and above all, rejoice in all that Jesus did for you with every word. Amen.