

93 Mark 15:42-47

Joseph's Courage

Text

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. 45 And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. 46 And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid.

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It was Friday, the day before the Sabbath. It has not yet been 24 hours since Jesus was eating freely with his disciples. Jesus has been betrayed, arrested, tried during the night, brought to Pilate by dawn, tried again, sentenced, scourged, mocked, and crucified. It has all happened so quickly that most of the population probably knew nothing about it. Perhaps as the day wore on more people became aware of what had happened and as the few who did see Jesus spread the news. But this has all happened in rapid succession.

In verse 43 we meet a man named Joseph of Arimathea. It is likely that he hailed from the town of Rama northwest of Jerusalem. He was part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body that just had Jesus crucified. It seems not all of the council convened for that midnight trial. Joseph appears to be a supporter of Jesus. We also know that Nicodemus who came to Jesus in John 3 was also a supporter. God is still preserving his remnant among Israel.

Even within this group composed of scholars, political leaders and elders, Joseph stood out. He was a respected member of the Sanhedrin. We are told that Joseph himself was looking for the kingdom of God. Jesus in his sermon on the mount said to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. I think that this really plays into the next clause when it says that he took courage and asked Pilate for the body of Jesus.

It really did take courage to do what he did. After all, Jesus, who was absolutely innocent, was just crucified. Given his position on the Sanhedrin, this was a very risky move. "No servant is greater than his master, if they persecute me they will persecute you." We know from the book of Acts that this persecution did indeed follow the disciples of Jesus.

He faced risk, not only from his own council members, but also from Pilate. You may recall that

Pilate was no friend of the Jews. He was a harsh ruler. He was eventually removed from office for being over the top. But if you know anything about Roman rulers, they were not exactly models of virtue. So how bad do you have to be for Rome to remove you for being too harsh? That was Pontius Pilate.

It was not uncommon for the bodies of criminals to be granted to relatives to be given a decent burial. But crucifixion was a different story. Often criminals who were crucified were just tossed into a common grave. Many times there were not taken down at all. Many times they would be left on the cross to be eaten by birds. Most crosses were not highly elevated as it appears Jesus' cross was. Most stood just above ground so the person was crucified almost at standing height. Thus the corpse would also become food for the dogs who would tug at it. Even so, if someone asked for the body, more often than not it would be granted.

The body would be granted, that is, except in the case of high treason. In that instance it was the rule of Rome that the body be left to decay as an example to any who would dare challenge the power of the emperor. But that was the exact charge for which Jesus was crucified. So here is Joseph, crossing party line of a people who had no qualms about stoning Stephen and crucifying Jesus. Here is Joseph crossing party lines and asking Pilate, a hater of the Jews, for something that was against Roman law.

What would make a man take such risks? What would give a man such courage? He was seeking the kingdom of God. His heart was fixed upon God. It is not as though no one else mattered. He did have to gather his courage. But God was more important to him than the Sanhedrin. Fear of God hung in his heart more than fear of man. He served the kingdom of God first and the kingdom of Caesar second.

Pilate's Surprise

44 Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. 45 And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph.

Pilate was surprised to find that Jesus had died already. Often times crucifixion would take days to run its course. There are probably a couple of reasons why Jesus died faster. First, many people were tied to the cross whereas Jesus was nailed. The extra pain of pushing against nails may have fatigued him far earlier and the loss of blood would have contributed to a weakened state. Second, the scourging he received was a very severe one. Since scourging was given as a punishment by itself without crucifixion, and given that some people died just from the scourging alone, it is likely that this was the major contributing factor. Jesus was too weakened to even carry his cross all the way to Golgotha.

Nonetheless, Pilate is surprised that Jesus is already dead. So he requests confirmation through the Centurion. It was at this point that one of the soldiers shoved a spear into the side of Jesus and blood and water flowed. The centurion reported that Jesus was indeed dead and so Pilate granted the body to Joseph.

This portion of the story actually lends additional credence to the rest of Mark's account. The fact that he granted the body to Joseph reveals that Pilate did not really think that Jesus was guilty of high treason and was probably irritated that the Jewish leaders threatened to go over his head. Both the sign that he placed over the head of Jesus and the fact that he granted the body to

Joseph is powerful evidence that the interaction that Mark recorded between the Jews and Pilate was real.

The Women's Witness

46 And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid.

Joseph, being a prominent member of the Sanhedrin was likely a man of resources. He probably began preparation for the burial before Jesus was actually dead. He probably would have had a burial plot nearby that could be used for family members. Although Mark does not record it, it was also likely that the body would have been washed before being wrapped and buried. The burial plots were holes cut into the rock. They were usually made for families and would sometimes be quite large. RT France states:

The work involved in cutting a new tomb, and the need to acquire a suitable site, meant that once begun a tomb was normally extended internally so that some contain several chambers with shelves or tunnels. . . for the bodies (the largest I have been in had chambers on two levels, in all accommodating more than sixty.

Joseph probably set his servants to work making all the preparations while he went to ask for the body. And once permission was granted his servants were set to taking down the body and washing it. It all had to be done quickly in order that the task would be complete by sundown. Once the sun was set, no work could be done since that begins the Sabbath.

While most tombs had square stones set in front of it, the wealthy had circular stones that could be rolled into place. This would have been a large disk shaped stone very similar to a mill stone. It would have required several men to roll it back.

This section ends with the two Marys attending the whole process. They probably followed at a distance so as not to be in the way. Since there was such a hurry for the burial, it is not likely that they would have had a chance to procure the spices for body. They followed to find where he was laid so they could later open it up again and further attend the body.

Application

Who was this Joseph? This is the first we hear of him. Where has he been this whole time? When Jesus was in need of a friend, where was Joseph? Where was Joseph with his considerable influence during the confrontations between Jesus and the other leaders? John tells us that he was a secret disciple for fear of the Jews. He would not come forward earlier, but that fear now takes its rightful place as he gathers his courage to ask for the body of Jesus revealing where his allegiance really is.

How about you dear Christian? When was the last time you found yourself in the company of those hostile to Christ and you have stood up for him? When was the last time you took the gospel to a person in need? How willing are you, no matter what others may think, of standing for Christ? How fervent are you to seek the kingdom of God?

If you have been a silent partner before, it is never too late. If you have been a secret disciple

previously, it is never too late to change. Gather your courage dear Christian and cross the party line. Gather your courage and serve your Lord. If they give you a funny look, they give you a funny look. If they laugh, they laugh. Gather your courage, seek the kingdom of God, let the world laugh and let the angels smile.

There is a spiritual war going on here. How many of you believe that? There may well be an individual in McCook that will not be saved except by your witness. God has promised that his word will not return void, so let us preach it. Let us proclaim it. Let us read the word, eat the word, breath the word. Let us live the word, speak the word, challenge and comfort with the word. For some it will be "a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."

I desire us to take a very serious turn this next year. I desire us to be absolutely sold out for Jesus and the kingdom. If you all will nod your heads in agreement that Jesus is worth our lives, then let us stop talking and start doing. If we say he is worth all, let us give all. If we say that we would give our lives for him, then let us prove it for the course of one year.

I want us to eat and drink kingdom work.