
Joseph of Arimathea

“When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph were looking on to see where He was laid” (Mark 15:42–47).

The Jewish leaders did not want the bodies of Jesus and the thieves remaining on the cross through Friday night and into Saturday. They believed—through Deuteronomy 21:22, 23—that to leave them on the cross would defile the land, the Sabbath, and the approaching Passover. They went to Pilate and asked him to end their lives by breaking their legs so that they could be taken down from the cross (John 19:31). Pilate granted their wish. The Jews must have assumed that the Roman soldiers, after killing them, would take the bodies down and discard them or bury them in some common grave. At least, there is no evidence in the text of the Gospels that the Jews had made any plans for the bodies to be taken down and buried.

Roman law allowed relatives to claim the body of an executed criminal and bury it. Jesus’ relatives were Galileans, and either for fear of the Jews or for lack of a Jerusalem tomb, they chose not to claim His body. The apostles, being also Galileans and not being physical relatives, would have no reason to expect Pilate to release the body to them. Therefore, if Jesus’ body was going to be buried with any kind of dignity, someone else, unknown to His relatives, apostles, and Galilean disciples, would have to do it.

Through His wonderful providence, God had a man ready to provide respectful burial for His Son. The man was named Joseph. He was from an obscure Judean town called Arimathea. He was a Jew who had advanced in Judaism and had been added to the Sanhedrin council (Mark 15:43a; Luke 23:50). With growth,

perseverance, and education, he had excelled to one of the highest positions that any Jew could ever attain. It would have been hard for any Jewish man to see any goal beyond serving as a sitting member of the Sanhedrin. In addition to all of this, perhaps due to his position and influence, he was considered a wealthy man. Any Jew would have viewed him as a man who had made it to the top.

Shortly after Jesus’ death, he came out of the shadows and went to Pilate and asked for permission to bury the body of Jesus. His being a member of the Sanhedrin would have given him standing with Pilate. After the request was made, Pilate confirmed that Jesus was dead, and then granted the permission to Joseph. He took the body down from the cross, wrapped it in a linen cloth that he had brought, carried it to his own tomb, and, with the help of Nicodemus, properly interlaced it with spices and laid it to rest.

Without hesitation we can say that Joseph of Arimathea did one of the most wonderful things that any human being could do—he buried the body of our Lord! After Jesus had died for our sins, Joseph took His body and, with reverence and consideration, laid it in a nearby tomb to rest until its resurrection on Sunday morning. Who can think of a more beautiful deed for a man to do! By adapting Matthew 26:13, we can say of him, “Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this man has done will also be spoken of in memory of him.”

Is there anything about this man that we should imitate? He had his faults to be sure, but

he also had admirable traits. Let us commend him and learn from his character.

The trait of discipleship. He was a disciple of Jesus. Matthew wrote that he “himself had also become a disciple of Jesus” (Matthew 27:57). It is true that he had been one in secret (John 19:38a), but after Jesus’ death, he came out courageously into the open. He, somewhere, somehow, had heard the evidence of Jesus’ Deity. In his heart he had weighed it and had accepted it. He had yielded to Jesus and had made Him his Master.

The trait of expectation. The kingdom of God had captured his heart. Mark said that he “himself was waiting for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:42). He had no doubt heard Jesus preach of the coming of God’s kingdom. This thought had thrilled him and put his heart into a state of anticipation. “I will look for it and receive it when it comes,” he told himself.

The traits of goodness and righteousness. The sterling qualities of goodness and righteousness had become interwoven in his character. He had a good heart and lived a righteous life, and his heart was fertile soil for the teaching of Jesus. Luke described him as “a good and righteous man” (Luke 23:50b). He also said of him that he did not “consent” to the terrible plans and designs of the council (Luke 23:51a). Out of his heart had come righteous deeds, not evil ones. His deep, authentic character would not allow him to mistreat the Righteous One from heaven. He must have refused to be present when the Sanhedrin put together their plan to instigate Jesus’ crucifixion.

The trait of spirituality. He allowed the cross of Jesus to change him. Apparently, many had witnessed the crucifixion but had gone home unchanged. They looked, watched the agony, saw the signs, but only beat their chests in bewilderment. On the other hand, the cross changed Joseph forever. John said that even though he was a disciple of Jesus, he had been “a secret one for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38). However, all the confirmatory signs of the cross—Jesus’ conduct, the darkness, and the earthquake—had brought him out of the closet and into the light of radical discipleship.

The trait of courage. He summoned the courage and put his life, wealth, and reputation on the line in behalf of Jesus. There comes a

time in life when no one has the courage that is required; we have to summon it or find it. We have to come up with it for that hour and for that occasion.

We do not know what happened to Joseph following his burial of Jesus. The Scriptures do not mention him again. Surely he was removed from his high position on the Sanhedrin. He may have had to leave Jerusalem and live in obscurity in the little unknown village of Arimathea. He could not have known what the outcome of his actions was going to be; he must have known that his public identification with the burial of Jesus was going to be a life-changing identification for him.

The traits of reverence and respect. He could not allow the body of Jesus to be taken down by the soldiers and buried with the thieves with whom He had died. Joseph had to make sure that Jesus’ body received a burial that possessed the dignity and respect that should go with the death of any human being.

He took the body down and wrapped it with an expensive linen cloth and buried it in his own rock-hewed tomb. Luke said, “And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain” (Luke 23:53).

The trait of generosity. He generously gave to our Lord what He needed at the time He needed it. No one else was going to come forward, and it remained for Joseph to do what had to be done. He did not count the cost; he seized the opportunity. He used his position, possessions, reputation, proximity, and character to provide for Jesus when He could not provide for Himself. We will always be grateful for what he did.

Here then is a great man. We see coming together in him the great spiritual qualities that every man should have. He was a disciple of Jesus, a man whose heart the kingdom of God had captured, a man persuaded by the cross, a reverent and respectful man, and a man of generosity and kindness. No man arrives at this composition of character all at once; he must grow daily through the right decisions and through the nurturing of a good heart. Then, when the crisis comes, he steps out as a shining example for all to remember.

Eddie Cloer



Jesus endured the cross for us and He has called us to follow Him. We must ask Him to take away all our fears, to remove all the coldness from our hearts, to remove all our unwillingness to suffer for His sake. Let us glory in His cross—glorying in what He did for us and even glorying in His invitation for us to come and bear His cross with Him, whether He asks us to hang beside Him or to bury His body.