

Witnesses: 3. Believer (Joseph of Arimathea)

John 19:38-42

March 19, 2017

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Play it safe. Don't get in over your head. Be aware of your surroundings. Life is short, be careful. All are expressions meant to protect us, and helpful advice. And in this series, as we consider those who witnessed what happened 2000 years ago in the crucifixion of Jesus, there was one man who ignored that advice and stepped out of his comfort zone and acted on his faith. It wasn't easy. And though the Bible gives us very little information about him, his act of faith would provide a message for us nearly 2000 years later.

In this 14th century work of art (photo), the unknown artist depicts this man, Joseph of Arimathea at the center in a blue/green robe, holding the body of Jesus. No longer is he watching from a distance, but the artist wants us to see that his moment of faith put into action has moved him to the center of this story. This is Joseph's story.

Joseph of Arimathea appears in all four of the gospels but only at the end. Aside from the 12 disciples hardly anyone is mentioned by all four gospel writers. After Jesus dies, Joseph goes to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who hours earlier had sentenced Jesus to die and says, I would like Jesus' body to give him a decent burial. Crucifixion was not only a means of execution but an act of terror meant to strike fear into the heart of people and therefore the bodies were left on the cross to rot and then thrown into the dump where wild animals would consume what the elements did not. But Joseph doesn't want that. Overcoming the personal danger that he would face in making such a request, he boldly requests from Pilate the body of Jesus and then Joseph buries Jesus in his own tomb. That Joseph had a tomb meant he was wealthy and if you were wealthy you began preparing a tomb when you were younger. It would be your monument. When Pilate grants his request, with the help of Nicodemus who brought 75 pounds of embalming spices, Joseph cleans Jesus body, wraps him in fine linen, places him in his tomb that had never been used, and rolls a large stone in front of the entrance to seal the tomb. So, who was this man?

Joseph was born in Arimathea, a tiny town in the hill country near Jerusalem. He was wealthy. Luke tells us he was "a good and upright" man. He was a man of prominence. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin. It was the Supreme Court of its time, deciding matters relating to the Law of Moses. He had position and power. He was a mover and shaker in Jerusalem. But the Bible also tells us "**Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders.**" Did he fear his colleagues on the Sanhedrin would beat him up? Of course not. Did he hear they would put him in prison? I don't think so. I think he was afraid they would think less of him if it became known he was a follower of Jesus. What do you think was important for Joseph of Arimathea? Maybe it was impressing other people – not just anyone gets to be part of the Sanhedrin. Maybe the affirmation and praise of others. Maybe it was having others think highly of him. Whatever it was, it was so important that though he followed Jesus secretly he did not announce publicly that he was a follower of Jesus.

There was another member of the Sanhedrin by the name of Nicodemus. In John 3, we read that Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness, drawn to Jesus but not wanting anyone to know. He, too, was a secret follower. There was an emptiness inside that adherence to the laws and rituals could not fill. A lifetime of doing the right things in order to be considered faithful to God was not working for him, and Jesus offered a new birth, a new beginning, a way of living not dependent upon whether you are good enough but a life lived in response to the

God who says you are good already. And in John 7 when there is a debate among the Jewish leaders about the things Jesus is saying and doing in Galilee, Nicodemus speaks up **“Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?”** And all eyes turn to Nicodemus and then they point to Nicodemus, **“Are you from Galilee, too?”** And Nicodemus became silent. It can be hard to stand up when everyone else is saying sit down and be quiet.

And for Joseph, fitting in and maintaining the approval of his peers was so important that even though he followed Jesus secretly, he did not even attempt what Nicodemus had done. Sit down and be quiet. Play it safe. Don't call attention to yourself. And where this is most challenging is the final night of Jesus' life when Jesus is taken before the Jewish ruling council. Was Joseph there? Did he decide to skip the meeting? Or was he in the shadows? And if he was there, did he stand there listening to the insults directed at Jesus as they found him guilty of blasphemy and sentenced him to death? Was he silent the entire time? As Jesus was led out to the garbage dump for execution, as the Roman soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross, as the crowd taunted, as the sun turned to darkness, as he heard Jesus cry out “I thirst” and plead with God “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”, as he watched Jesus breathe his last – finally Joseph was compelled to step forward. It was as if this was the moment when like Peter the rooster crowed. This was the moment he finally steps out of his comfort zone, out of the shadows and says, “I don't care what they think of me anymore, I'm not going to let Jesus be thrown into the dump.”

How important to you is the way you are perceived by others? We all wrestle with this. We decided what clothes to wear today and then we looked in the mirror before leaving the house and we thought, “That's good.” And that's okay. We don't want to look bad. We comb our hair and brush our teeth and put on a clean shirt, we don't want to look bad. But sometimes it goes beyond that. It becomes hugely important to impress others – impression management – dress for success. Do you remember when you didn't have to stage a house to be able to sell it? You removed the clutter, cleaned the floors, painted the walls and that was enough. Now we walk through a house that's up for sale and it's staged – no one could like that – it's not real, no one lives that way. But we want the right impression and the impression is more important than what's real – because if people knew, really knew – what would they think of us. It's not who we are. Or not who God wants us to be. Joseph was willing to sacrifice his values and beliefs and allow an innocent man to die, a man he believe in, because he was afraid of losing the status that he had. ...**they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory of God.** Have you ever loved human glory or human praise more than praise from God?

There is no such thing as secret discipleship. Either the secrecy will destroy the discipleship or the discipleship will destroy the secrecy. Picture a young man down on one knee, making a marriage proposal as eloquently as he can: “I'd like to marry you. I love you. I know we could have a good life together. I know you will be good for me. But there's one condition – let's not tell anyone. I don't want anyone to I asked you.” Don't you think that would take some of the joy the from the moment and even make you wonder what kind of commitment this really was? The act of being silent and not admitting you are a follower of Jesus or at least not speaking up when something bad is about to happen that goes against our values. I'm reminded of a quote that is attributed to Edmund Burke who lived in 18th century England: **“The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to remain silent.”** Why do good people remain silent in the face of evil? They know it is evil or wrong, but they are more concerned about what will happen to them or what other people will think.

I think I've told you about Terry. We were in the same grade in school. He was quiet, kind of nerdy, overweight, kept to himself. His clothes were disheveled and an easy target for those who were looking for someone to pick on who would not fight back. Terry and his younger sister attended our church, and Terry was part of our youth group. One day before school when we were in the 9th grade, Terry was putting his lunch bag in his locker when someone grabbed his lunch bag – and in the school hallway a couple of guys began a game of keep away, tossing his lunch between them while Terry tried to get his lunch back. But in spite of his pleas to stop, they would throw his lunch or kick it away from him, until the paper bag burst, spilling the contents on the floor. I noticed his sandwich and the white bread was moldy – and one of the guys who had thrown his lunch bag saw it too and began taunting him, saying a few things about him that I won't repeat and suddenly Terry burst into tears. And inside, I knew what I was seeing was wrong. Inside I was thinking, somebody needs to stand up for him and say something or do something. But I was too afraid about what they would say about me or do to me if I helped him. So, I remained silent – and 45 years later, I still remember.

How important to you is what others say about you? Being identified as a follower of Jesus. This is a small thing but at mealtime, do you stop before you eat and give thanks. What about when you are out in public? If you are at Panera or at the Pancake House, do you stop and before you eat say, "Lord, thank you for this day, for this food, and for our lives. Bless those who prepared this meal in your name. Amen." Or maybe I don't want anyone to hear me pray and think I might be a religious fanatic. I realize people expect me to pray because I'm a pastor and so I might be with a group of people and before I start eating (and I'll admit it is a little awkward if others have already started eating) – I'll say, "Could I pray for us?" But if you're not the pastor, it might feel even more awkward, especially if someone else is hosting the meal, but would it work if for just a moment you bowed your head and said quietly, "Lord, thank you for the food. I love you. Amen." No big deal – you're not pushing your beliefs on anyone. Again, it's just a little thing – but it's a place to begin.

How important are impressions and are we willing to be identified as followers of Jesus? Do the people who know you know you go to church? Can they tell you are a follower of Jesus by the way you live your life?

Joseph of Arimathea was a person for whom the cross did what not even the life of Jesus could do. When he had seen Jesus alive, he felt this attraction but he could not act on it. But when he saw Jesus on the cross, love broken through. He stood up. He stepped forward. He spoke up. And for 2000 years, he has been honored for what he did.

Grow Pray, Study for Week of March 19, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that it's never too late to give you my allegiance and love. Help me to move beyond any fear or embarrassment I might feel about being one of your disciples. Let your light shine through me. Amen.

Monday, March 20

Scripture: John 3:1-19; 7:43-52

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom." Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second

time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?" "Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son. "This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil.

So the crowd was divided over Jesus. Some wanted to arrest him, but no one grabbed him. The guards returned to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked, "Why didn't you bring him?" The guards answered, "No one has ever spoken the way he does." The Pharisees replied, "Have you too been deceived? Have any of the leaders believed in him? Has any Pharisee? No, only this crowd, which doesn't know the Law. And they are under God's curse!" Nicodemus, who was one of them and had come to Jesus earlier, said, "Our Law doesn't judge someone without first hearing him and learning what he is doing, does it?" They answered him, "You are not from Galilee too, are you? Look it up and you will see that the prophet doesn't come from Galilee."

Observation: Like Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus was a member of the highest Hebrew religious council. He saw Jesus' obvious spiritual power, and wanted to get to know this new teacher. Yet he could have lost a lot, socially and economically, if his colleagues saw him with Jesus. He came at night. Later, when the council moved toward condemning Jesus, he timidly asked them to give Jesus a fair hearing, but seems to have backed off when they ridiculed him.

Application: In John 7:49, the leaders of the council expressed a common attitude: contempt toward the crowd of ordinary people that "doesn't know the law." Nicodemus tried to protect Jesus by citing a key (and not even controversial) part of that very law. They didn't respond to the sound basis for his question, but tried to intimidate him: was he following the Galilean? It seems to have worked. When have you kept silent about a matter of principle because of scorn or other social risk if you pressed a point?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me not to shy away from the light you brought into the world, even if it shines on places where I need to change and grow. Blow the renewing wind of your Spirit through my life. Amen.

Tuesday, March 21

Scripture: Mark 15:42-47

Since it was late in the afternoon on Preparation Day, just before the Sabbath, Joseph from Arimathea dared to approach Pilate and ask for Jesus' body. (Joseph was a prominent council member who also eagerly anticipated the coming of God's kingdom.) Pilate wondered if Jesus

was already dead. He called the centurion and asked him whether Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that Jesus was dead, Pilate gave the dead body to Joseph. He bought a linen cloth, took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in the cloth, and laid him in a tomb that had been carved out of rock. He rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was buried.

Observation: Joseph, described as a man who “eagerly anticipated the coming of God’s kingdom,” stepped up after Jesus died, and provided a tomb for his body. The Kingdom of God is the reign of God that God brings about through Jesus, i.e. the establishment of God’s rule in the hearts and lives of his people, the overcoming of all the forces of evil, the removal from the world of all the consequences of sin, and the creation of a new order of righteousness and peace.

Application: We will learn more about “Joseph from Arimathea” in the other three gospels. One key characteristic stands out in Mark’s account. The Romans usually left crucified bodies exposed to the birds and the weather, as a warning to others. Mark said Joseph “dared to approach Pilate and ask for Jesus’ body.” What do you believe it took for this “prominent council member” to publicly associate himself with the executed Jesus? What have you found in Jesus that is not found elsewhere?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, let me be empowered by the fullness of your love, and then give me the kind of courage that Joseph had to honor my commitment to you. Amen.

Wednesday, March 22

Scripture: Matthew 27:57-61

That evening a man named Joseph came. He was a rich man from Arimathea who had become a disciple of Jesus. He came to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Pilate gave him permission to take it. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had carved out of the rock. After he rolled a large stone at the door of the tomb, he went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting in front of the tomb.

Observation: Matthew wrote that Joseph “had become a disciple,” and that he gave Jesus, not just a tomb, but “his own new tomb.” Joseph was a member of the ruling council and yet privately (and quietly), a disciple of Jesus. He did not go public with his belief until he saw the crucifixion. We are left to speculate why he waited. But for those who doubted that Jesus was actually raised from the dead, that a member of the ruling council believed would lend credibility and believability to what happened.

Application: Have you ever faced a situation that called on you to decide what your loyalty to Jesus is worth—one in which you could have a promotion, a relationship or some other reward if only you’d act in a way that betrayed your commitment to Jesus? If so, what did you do? In what ways, day by day, do you show your loyalty to Jesus as Lord?

Prayer: Lord God, make me a person who values you above all the treasures of this world. Help me to offer you my very best, now and always. Amen.

Thursday, March 23

Scripture: Luke 23:50-56

Now there was a man named Joseph who was a member of the council. He was a good and righteous man. He hadn't agreed with the plan and actions of the council. He was from the Jewish city of Arimathea and eagerly anticipated God's kingdom. This man went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Taking it down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb carved out of the rock, in which no one had ever been buried. It was the Preparation Day for the Sabbath, and the Sabbath was quickly approaching. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph. They saw the tomb and how Jesus' body was laid in it, then they went away and prepared fragrant spices and perfumed oils. They rested on the Sabbath, in keeping with the commandment.

Observation: Luke found that the “good and righteous” Joseph disagreed with the Council’s plans against Jesus—yet apparently stayed silent until after Jesus was dead. Jesus’ trial was a travesty—the high priest pushed from the very start to condemn and execute Jesus. Joseph “went public” after the crucifixion, asking for the right to take Jesus’ body and bury it decently. His belated but real commitment and courage set the stage for the empty tomb on the resurrection morning.

Application: Mark 14:64 said, “They all condemned him as worthy of death.” Imagine yourself as a member of that council, knowing the powerful high priest and his inner circle had made up their minds before the “trial” ever started. Would you be the one voice that said, “Wait—I don’t agree”? Are you willing to speak out about injustice or cruelty, even if everyone else is silent?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes all it takes is one voice, polite but firm, to stop peer pressure from forcing us to do things we don’t believe are right. Grow me into the kind of person who can be that one voice. Amen.

Friday, March 24

Scripture: John 19:38-42

After this Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take away the body of Jesus. Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one because he feared the Jewish authorities. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and took the body away. Nicodemus, the one who at first had come to Jesus at night, was there too. He brought a mixture of myrrh and aloe, nearly seventy-five pounds in all. Following Jewish burial customs, they took Jesus' body and wrapped it, with the spices, in linen cloths. There was a garden in the place where Jesus was crucified, and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish Preparation Day and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus in it.

Observation: Joseph’s ownership of a new stone tomb, and Nicodemus’ provision of nearly 75 pounds of costly embalming spices, showed that, like most other council members, these men were quite wealthy. Their economic and social prominence must have played a role in their choice to keep their love for Jesus out of sight. Seeing Jesus give up his life on the cross led Joseph to bring his secret discipleship into the light.

Application: John wrote, “Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one because he feared the Jewish authorities.” With him, John said, came Nicodemus, who earlier “came to Jesus at night” (cf. John 3:2). Have you ever tried to keep something important a secret, and felt a sense

of relief and freedom once it was in the open? Even in their sadness at Jesus' death, how did Joseph and Nicodemus find freedom and fulfillment in owning their love for Jesus?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, free me from fear, from the desire to hide, from living in the darkness. Give me the courage to live boldly in your eternal daylight. Amen.

Saturday, March 25

Scripture: Matthew 21:28-32

"What do you think? A man had two sons. Now he came to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' "No, I don't want to,' he replied. But later he changed his mind and went. "The father said the same thing to the other son, who replied, 'Yes, sir.' But he didn't go. "Which one of these two did his father's will?" They said, "The first one." Jesus said to them, "I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of you. For John came to you on the righteous road, and you didn't believe him. But tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. Yet even after you saw this, you didn't change your hearts and lives and you didn't believe him.

Observation: Jesus told a pointed story in which a father told two sons to work in his vineyard. From one son, he got a "no" that became yes; from the other, a "yes" that became no. The story challenges all of us, and it showed the difference between Judas and Joseph of Arimathea. Judas followed Jesus for three years, but in the end turned away into the night. Joseph kept hiding his allegiance to Jesus until the cross moved him beyond fear to become an open disciple.

Application: In his commentary, William Barclay wrote that this story was "setting before us a picture of two very imperfect sets of people, of whom one set were none the less better than the other. Neither son in the story was the kind of son to bring full joy to his father. Both were unsatisfactory; but the one who in the end obeyed was incalculably better than the other. The ideal son would be the son who accepted the father's orders with obedience and respect and who unquestioningly and fully carried them out." How can you keep growing toward greater authenticity in your spiritual life? In other words, how can you say "yes" to God, and then live out that commitment every day?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, let me follow you faithfully, neither turning away from you when things get tough, nor hiding my commitment when others press me to do that. Help me to be a fully faithful child of yours. Amen.