

### The Burial of the Lord's Body

#### John 19:38-42

John 19:38-42: *“After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. <sup>39</sup> And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. <sup>40</sup> Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. <sup>41</sup> Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. <sup>42</sup> So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews’ Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby.”*

#### Background Notes

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four Gospels. Arimathea was a town about twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem. From the Gospels of Mark and Luke we learn that Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews.

Matthew's Gospel says that Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man. Thus the prophecy about Christ's death in Isaiah 53:9 was fulfilled: *“And they made His grave... with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.”* Joseph of Arimathea was a secret believer in Jesus, but he came forth openly to request the body of Jesus from Pontius Pilate.

Nicodemus is mentioned only in the Gospel of John. He, too, believed in secret at first. Remember, Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus at night (John 3). We also saw Nicodemus in John 7, when he spoke out in the Sanhedrin to advocate for justice for the Lord Jesus.

John 19:39 tells us that Nicodemus brought about 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes for the Jesus' burial. Large amounts of costly spices were not normally used for an average burial - they were generally used only in the burial of royalty. These spices were probably in powder or ointment form, and put on the strips of linen that were used to wrap the Lord's body. The large amount of spices would have prevented our Lord's severely injured body from undergoing any decay. Again, this fulfilled another Messianic prophecy, this time from Psalm 16:10 - *“For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.”*

The phrase “strips of linen” (v40) were strips of cloth that were customarily wrapped around the body. When Lazarus was raised from the dead, he came out of the tomb *“bound hand and feet.”* The Lord said, *“Loose him, and let him go”* (John

11:44). In other words, the Lord asked the onlookers at the tomb to cut loose the strips of cloth in which Lazarus was bound when he was prepared for burial.

A “shroud” was not mentioned, so if a burial shroud was used when our Lord was buried, it was used in addition to the strips of cloth. I mention this detail because the well-known “Shroud of Turin” is purported to be the burial shroud of Jesus Christ. I personally doubt that the Shroud of Turin is authentic, since radioactive carbon tests recently dated the cloth to the Middle Ages.

In verse 41-42 we read, *“Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews’ Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby.”*

Other Gospel accounts tells us that the new tomb was carved out of solid rock, that it was owned by Joseph of Arimathea, and that it was near the place where the Lord was crucified. In Jerusalem today, you can visit two sites which both meet these specifications: the traditional tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the well-known Garden Tomb. We don’t know which (if either) is the authentic site of our Lord's death and burial.

## **Doctrinal/Teaching Points**

### **1. God counts secret belief for salvation.**

Verse 38 says that Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple *“for fear of the Jews.”* He would have feared not only for his physical safety, but he also feared he would be ostracized from the religious community and prevented from participating in the synagogue because of his association with Jesus.

Both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were secret believers at first, but at the Lord's death they stepped out boldly as believers. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were not the only secret believers among the Jewish religious leaders. John 12:42-43 says, *“Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”* These secret believers should have made their faith known sooner, but at least they had **genuine faith**.

And God counts secret belief for salvation! Back in the Old Testament, when Elijah complained to God that he was the only believer in the northern kingdom of Israel? The Lord replied that there were 7,000 secret believers in Israel who had not bowed the knee to the pagan Canaanite god, Baal! It would have been better had these 7000 believers come out of hiding and supported Elijah – but nonetheless they were believers! Clearly, God counts secret belief for salvation.

There are secret believers within Judaism today. I’m reading a section from a recent book written by a Christian who lives in Israel. “In the Holy Land, one gets accustomed to hearing all sorts of exaggerated tales. I would not have believed the

following story if I had not heard it directly from the person involved. A member of the staff at the Garden Tomb related this incident, which occurred one day as he was greeting visitors at the entrance. Many Christian visitors to the Holy Land are familiar with the Garden Tomb, tucked away up a narrow alley near Jerusalem's Old City. The Garden Tomb is a possible site of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. I have enjoyed many refreshing visits to the lovely garden – it is an oasis of serenity in the midst of the noise and confusion on the other side of the high walls.

The guide was startled one day to see a Hasidic Jew suddenly come through the entrance. These ultra-orthodox Jews are attired in the long black coats and knee stockings of 18th century Prussia where the sect was founded. They live in reclusive quarters of the city of Jerusalem, keeping to themselves lest they be tainted by contact with non-religious Jews and Gentiles. Of all the manifold varieties of Jews in Israel, none is more dedicated to Judaism than the Hasidim.

Since the Hasidim are fervently opposed to the belief in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the guide was concerned that the man was up to something. He followed the Hasid as he made his way quickly through the Garden, looking very much out of place with his untrimmed sideburns flowing from beneath his black hat. The guide was growing ever more concerned that the man was a fanatic, bent on mischief.

His fears intensified as the man crept up quietly behind a Christian tour group that was having a worship service. The guide quickened his pace to confront the Hasid before he disrupted the service. But just as he was closing in, the guide stopped in his tracks. Unnoticed, unobtrusively, the ultra-Orthodox Jew was singing with the group of worshipping Christians! The guide stood still, dumbfounded.

After a while, just as quickly as he had come, the man turned around and began to walk out of the Garden. The guide could restrain himself no longer. "Just a minute," the guide called out. "I couldn't help observing you back there." The two men, from two very different worlds, looked at each other. Then the Hasid, seemingly anticipating his question, said just four words before turning and leaving: "I know Him too." Here is a man, existing in the smothering confines of Judaism's most extreme sect, who had come to know Jesus as his Messiah!"

So, just like Nicodemus and Joseph, there are secret believers in Israel today.

Maybe you're a secret believer. Maybe you're afraid to show your faith because you may lose your job or be ostracized from your friends and family. Well, here's the good news and the bad news. The bad news: if you're a secret believer, you're losing out on the blessings and the rewards that come with letting your faith be known. The good news: even if you're a secret believer, you're saved, and you're on your way to heaven! Our gracious God **does** count secret belief for salvation!

## **2. God ensured an honorable burial for His Son.**

God allowed the Lord Jesus to be dishonored while He was alive. During His life our Lord was constantly criticized, mocked and insulted. At His trial, He was spit upon and scourged. He was nailed to a Roman cross, and He died with criminals. But once the work of redemption was complete, and the Roman soldier's spear had pierced His side to prove

that He was dead, the body of our Lord was touched only by the hands of believers. No longer was He made a curse, and no longer was He dishonored! His work of suffering for sin, our sin, was over. It was finished! After his death He was handled honorably, but the hands of friends, with loving care. Our Lord was buried as a King.

Think of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and others, carefully removing the Lord's body from the cross, and gently and lovingly preparing His body for burial. He was buried in a large, new tomb that was fit for a king. God ensured an honorable burial for His Son.

## **Practical Application**

**Remember that difficult circumstances will reveal your true character.**

What finally revealed the true character of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus? Not the normal circumstances of everyday life, but the very difficult circumstances surrounding the death of Christ. They couldn't sit idly by when such a travesty of justice was taking place. They had to take a public stand! Their true character as believers was revealed in the midst of the most difficult circumstances.

In the same way, difficult circumstances will reveal your true character. It's not revealed when everyone around you is doing the right thing. Your true character and moral strength is revealed when everyone around you is doing the wrong thing. The Lord Jesus said that your life's foundation becomes obvious when the **storms of life** come. Is your life constructed on a foundation of rock - or of sand? Has your true character been tested yet? Is it being tested now?

One of my good friends, a medical doctor, is now working at a hospital in a country that was formerly part of the Soviet Union. In a recent letter he told us of the very difficult circumstances that he and his wife are facing. Conditions within the hospital are terrible. Sanitation is below standard, and medical ethics are lacking. The graft and political corruption is so rampant that threats have been made upon his life because he will not go along with the unjust and corrupt system! His character is being tested by these difficult circumstances, and right now he's standing firm.

You, too, may be tested by difficult circumstances. Remember -- **difficult circumstance will reveal your true character!**