

The Burial of the Lord in the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea

Mark 15:42-27

Mark 15:42-47 – *“Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵ So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷ And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus observed where He was laid.”*

Background Notes

The events of Mark 15:42-47 took place on the evening the “Preparation Day” (v42). In the Jewish way of reckoning, “evening” was between three o’clock in the afternoon and sunset. The Law stated that no work was to be done on the Sabbath, so Friday was called the “Preparation Day” because all the preparations for the Sabbath (including meals) were done before sundown on Friday. Observant Jews today still continue this practice.

Because no burials could take place on the Sabbath, and according to the Law bodies should be buried before sunset (Deuteronomy 21), it was a matter of urgency that the Lord be buried before sunset, when the Sabbath would begin.

This obvious haste to bury the Lord is very strong evidence that the Lord was crucified on Friday, not Thursday (as some people posit). But what about the “three days and three nights”? “Three days and three nights” was a cultural expression. In their cultural way of thinking, any part of a twenty-four hour period could be considered a day and a night.

A man named Joseph from Arimathea (a town about twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem) was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the supreme council of the Jews. Joseph was a devout Jew who was waiting for the kingdom of God to come on earth. He had not given his consent to the Sanhedrin’s decision to arrest and crucify Jesus. Luke 23:50-51 - *“...there was a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man. He had not consented to their decision and deed. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God.”*

Up until this time Joseph of Arimathea was a secret believer in Jesus, but after the crucifixion he boldly came forth and asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Nicodemus, another member of the Sanhedrin, also let his faith be known openly as

this time. John 19:38-39 - *“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. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds.”*

It was quite unusual for the Roman authorities to grant the body of a crucified person to anyone other than a relative, but Pilate allowed Joseph to have the body of Jesus. This may be another indication that Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of the false charge of treason that was leveled against Jesus.

Doctrinal Point

The inspired record in these six verses leaves no doubt that Jesus **really died and was buried**. The “swoon theory” is proposed by skeptics who try say that Jesus never really died. The idea that He only “swooned” or lost consciousness, and then revived in the cool of the tomb, is certainly shot down here! Verses 44-45: *“Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph.”*

Normally, death did not claim a crucified person for two or three days, so Pilate was surprised when the report came that Jesus was already dead. That’s why he sent a Roman centurion to check if Jesus was really dead. A centurion was a seasoned Roman military officer, who was experienced in war and well able to recognize whether a person was dead or not. We can be sure that such a man would not make a mistake about the certainty of death - and particularly when his career would be in jeopardy if he made a mistake. There’s no way the early Christians could have made up such a story and put it into the Gospel record if it wasn’t true. The “swoon theory” is just one way skeptics try to avoid the overwhelming evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The historical fact of Jesus Christ’s death and burial is certain!

Although the biblical record leaves no doubt as to the certainty of Christ’s death and burial, it does not give us the exact location of the tomb. From the Gospel accounts we know that it was a new tomb, hewn out of rock, located somewhere outside the walls of 1st century Jerusalem, near the place of crucifixion, and in a garden - but we don’t know the exact location.

John 19:40-41 states: *“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. 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.”* So Jesus was buried in a new tomb that was cut out of rock, near the place of crucifixion, in a garden and outside the city walls of Jerusalem - but we don’t know exactly where. The *fact* of Christ’s death and burial is more important than the *location* of the tomb!

If you go to Jerusalem today, you will be shown two empty tombs, both thought to be the burial place of Christ. The “traditional” site is in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The other site is the Garden Tomb. Both empty tombs have some good evidence going for them, and probably one of them was the burial place of Christ, but we can’t be sure which one - or if it’s either one of them. But so what? The fact of Christ’s death and burial is what’s important, not the precise location of the tomb.

Joseph of Arimathea brought fine linen, took the body of Jesus down from the cross, and wrapped His body in the linen (v46). The Revised Standard Version translates this linen cloth as a “linen shroud.” In the 1st century, bodies were wrapped for burial with strips of cloth, along with spices (John 19), and then the body was placed in a large piece of cloth that was folded over the whole body. This was the burial “shroud,” and it seems that the shroud is the fine linen that is mentioned in verse 46 (RSV).

Many of you are familiar with a burial shroud known as the “Shroud of Turin,” that is kept in a church in Turin, Italy. Some people believe that the Shroud of Turin is the burial shroud of Christ because there is a faint image of a crucified man on the shroud. They believe that the image was imprinted on the cloth by a burst of radiation that occurred when Christ was resurrected. This burst of radiation is thought to have created a faint imprint of the crucified Christ on the cloth.

There’s a lot of doubt about the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin, particularly since radioactive carbon tests dated it to the Middle Ages. As far as I’m concerned, that’s good enough evidence against the authenticity of the Shroud. But no one has come up with a good explanation for the image, and a lot of questions remain about the validity of the tests. So - on and on it goes, about the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin.

But - the fact of Christ’s death and burial is far more important than the location of the tomb, or the authenticity of the Shroud!

Practical Application

Are you willing to risk your reputation for the sake of Christ?

Joseph of Arimathea was a prominent council (Sanhedrin) member (v43). Up to this point he was a secret believer, but after the Lord’s death he came out boldly to request the body of Jesus. He must have known that his reputation as a prominent member in the Sanhedrin would surely change. Never again would he be a member of the Sanhedrin! From that day on he would be known as a follower of Jesus – he would be part of a persecuted minority. But Joseph of Arimathea risked his reputation for the sake of Christ! Are you willing to risk your reputation for the sake of Christ?

A number of years ago, when I was working as a research scientist, another Christian and I started a lunchtime Bible study in the large research and development center where I worked. We contacted all the Christians that we knew and

gave the time and place for the Bible study. I found out that a colleague in my department was a Christian, and I asked him if he would like to join the Christian testimony at the research center and come to the Bible study. Bill said yes – but he never came - not once. Finally he admitted to me that he did not want to “risk his reputation.” Things were going well for him in the company and he had recently been promoted. He didn’t want to jeopardize his chances for further promotion by becoming known in the company as an outspoken Christian. He wouldn’t risk his reputation. As far as I know, Bill has done very well in this company. And as far as I know, Bill is still a secret believer. He would not risk his reputation.

Joseph of Arimathea risked his reputation for the sake of Christ. Are you willing to risk your reputation for the sake of Christ?