

The Burial of Jesus: Mark 15:40-47
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We're very close to the end of Mark now, and we'll be concluding our study of the Gospel of Mark in two weeks. We've studied Mark's account of the crucifixion, and this morning we turn our attention to the burial. These verses may be easy to overlook, but there are some important things for us to see here.

We've seen earlier in the Gospel of Mark an interesting literary device that Mark uses to interweave various scenes together. He sandwiches one story inside of another story. One of the most memorable was the account of Jairus's daughter in Mark 5. Jairus came to ask Jesus to heal His daughter, and Jesus went with him and raised the little girl to life. And inserted in the midst of Mark's account of that story, there is the story of Jesus healing the woman who had a discharge of blood. In these ways Mark has woven together significant events that happened in Jesus' ministry. One story is inserted into the midst of another story.

We have something similar to that happening again, for a final time, here in Mark 15:40-16:8. Verses 40-41 introduce these women who had followed Jesus and ministered to Him. They are standing at a distance as Jesus hangs on the cross. Two of these women are mentioned again in verse 47, as they watch Jesus' body being placed in the tomb. And then it's those same women who arrive on Sunday morning to discover that Jesus is no longer in the tomb.

Inserted into the midst of this is the account of Joseph of Arimathea who buries Jesus' dead body. This may seem like a lull in the story, between the climactic event of Jesus' death, and then the even greater climactic event of His resurrection. But this is a key component of the overall picture. Mark is telling us the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as he stated in the very first verse of chapter 1. Mark has a point to make, and in order for him to make that point, he has to give us some further details about what happened immediately after Jesus died.

Let's look at four different aspects of what Mark records for us here at the end of chapter 15. First, the death of Jesus. The things we're told here show us beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was really and truly dead. Second, the faith and fear of His disciples. We see faith and fear, both in the actions of the women and in the life of Joseph of Arimathea. Third, the providence of God. All of this is happening according to plan and according to what had been predicted. Fourth, the power of the Gospel. We see here how powerful and compelling the Gospel was even in the life of someone like Joseph of Arimathea.

The Death of Jesus

Among other things, this passage of Scripture shows us clearly that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died. He was really dead. These verses, as well as additional details in the other Gospels, show us beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus truly died that day. He did not merely faint or swoon, as some contend, and then regain consciousness in the tomb. That's ridiculous. No, He truly died.

Look at some of the evidence here. In verses 40-41 we might wonder why Mark gives the names of these women and even some details about them. One of the reasons is because they were eyewitnesses of Jesus' death, and then some of them were eyewitnesses of the resurrection as well. Mark is seeking to persuade his readers of the truth of who Jesus is and what He did. And, of course, these are some pretty amazing things Mark is writing about. These aren't the normal things people would expect to hear. These aren't the things you're used to hearing. So Mark knew that when this document was read in various places, there would be folks who might question it. And that's why he is careful to identify several eyewitnesses, and he identifies them specifically so that people could go and find them and ask them, "Did this really happen?"

Back in verse 21 he identified the man who carried the cross as "Simon, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus." Folks could go and ask Simon, or anyone in his family, and they could validate what was written in Mark's Gospel.

And now there are these women as well, who were looking on from a distance. Mark doesn't give us the names of all of them, but he mentions Mary Magdalene (who was named thus because she was from Magdala), and then another Mary (this is a very common name, so it's important to specify who you're talking about). So there was one Mary, from Magdala, who is also spoken of elsewhere. Jesus had healed her earlier in His ministry, casting 7 demons out of her (you can read that in Luke 8). And then there's this other Mary who was the mother of James and Joses. And then there's also Salome. There were others, too, but Mark just names these three women. But he identifies them clearly enough that the original readers of this Gospel would be able to find these individuals, or find members of their family, or friends of theirs, and verify the details of these accounts.

These women looked on from a distance at first, but then in verse 47 we find out that they have been following along through the whole burial process. They watched as Jesus' body was taken down from the cross. They watched as His body was washed and

wrapped in the linen shroud. They watched as His body was laid in the tomb. There was no mistaking the fact that Jesus was dead.

Joseph of Arimathea is the next eyewitness to this. This is mentioned in all 4 of the Gospels. Again, Joseph was a common name, but Mark tells us where he's from. And while today we can't be sure exactly where this was, the original readers would have known.

Joseph knew that Jesus was dead. When Joseph then went to Pilate, Pilate was surprised by this, so he got further testimony to confirm that Jesus was really dead. And the centurion provided that further testimony. The centurion who had been standing there when Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last (v. 37), Pilate called that centurion to confirm this. The centurion had been in charge of countless crucifixions. He had watched hundreds, if not thousands, of people die slowly on crosses. And he knew the difference between a person who was near death and a person who was already dead. He was an expert in such matters.

The Gospel of John tells of another thing that happened at this time. They pierced Jesus' side. They were going to break His legs in order to quicken His death, but they found out they didn't need to. They broke the legs of the other two, but when they came to Jesus they saw that He was already dead. So they didn't break His legs, but one of the soldiers did pierce His side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water (John 19:34). This is further evidence that Jesus was really dead. He had become fully human. He had taken on human flesh. He had a real human body. And He really died. This is important so that we can see the full wonder of the resurrection. It was not resuscitation. It was resurrection. He was dead, and then He was alive!

Two more details to highlight. One is the mention of the women being there to observe exactly where Jesus was laid in the tomb. They would be back with their spices on Sunday morning. And lest anyone think that these women showed up at the wrong tomb and jumped to the crazy conclusion that Jesus had risen from the dead, it's very plain here and in the other Gospels that they knew the tomb. There wasn't any chance that they would have come to a different tomb on Sunday morning.

The other detail is that a stone was rolled in front of the tomb. Matthew says that it was a "great stone." And Matthew also records that the Pharisees were concerned that the disciples might steal the body, so they requested from Pilate that guards be sent to secure the tomb, which Pilate granted. So there's no chance that anyone stole Jesus' body. He was really dead, and His body was really secure in that tomb.

So all of this sets up what we'll look at next Sunday, which is the resurrection.

The Faith and Fear of Jesus' Disciples

The twelve disciples have scattered, but we see in this scene some other disciples: the women, and Joseph of Arimathea. And in both cases, we can see elements of faith and fear. In the case of the women, we read that they had followed Jesus and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee. These women were devoted followers of Jesus. They loved Him, and He loved them. It's a pretty amazing thing for it to be said that they ministered to Jesus. *Diakoneō* is the verb: to serve, to take care of, to wait upon. They had made tremendous sacrifices to be with Jesus, to serve Him, to provide meals for Him. All of this was evidence of their deep faith in Him. They had listened to Him teach. They had witnessed His miracles. They were in awe of Him.

But there is fear mixed with this faith. At the crucifixion we find them looking on from a distance, as it says in verse 40. They were a little bit like Peter, who had been so bold in his declaration of his devotion to Jesus, but then when Jesus was arrested Peter followed Him "at a distance," it says in chapter 14:54. And then Peter proceeded to deny even knowing Jesus. The women don't go to that extent, but they are fearful. They stand off in the distance so as not to be too closely identified with Jesus while the Roman soldiers are standing all around. The women's fear is mentioned explicitly in 16:8 after the resurrection. "And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." They have faith, but they are also fearful.

Joseph of Arimathea is also a picture of both faith and fear. Verse 43 tells us that he was a respected member of the Council. That is, he was part of the Sanhedrin. This is really surprising, because we know that the Sanhedrin is the group of Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus to death. They are the ones in chapter 14 who brought false testimony against Jesus and charged Him with blasphemy and then convinced Pilate to crucify Him. Joseph was part of that group. He was one of those guys! And he wasn't just on the bottom rung of that exclusive club. He was highly esteemed among them. He was the elite among the elite of the religious power structure. He had a very high position, and therefore he had a lot to lose if he bucked the system, if he went against the unanimous decision of his peers.

But that's exactly what he did. He was willing to give up his esteemed position. He was willing to give up his life even, because of his devotion to Jesus. In Luke's description of Joseph it says that he had not consented to the Sanhedrin's decision and action. That would have been a pretty significant stand to take against the rest of the Council. And then he even goes so far as to approach Pilate and request Jesus' body. That could have cost

Joseph his life—to openly identify with a man who had been condemned to execution. Verse 43 says that Joseph “took courage.” Mark wants to highlight that. This is a man who had a deep faith in Jesus, and that faith emboldened him to take a great risk. Joseph was a man of faith and courage.

He was also a man who was fearful, though. The account in John’s Gospel describes Joseph in this way: he “was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews.” You see, he had faith, but he was also fearful. He was a disciple of Jesus who was filled with trust and courage, on the one hand, and filled with fear, on the other hand. I’m so glad that Bible gives us details like this. The Bible shows us men and women who had this same kind of tension in their lives that we experience. There’s faith, but there’s also fear. There’s the desire to be courageous and take risks for Jesus, but there’s also the anxiety and worry and fear of what might happen to us if we do take those risks.

The man in Mark 9 summed it up when he cried out to Jesus and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” That’s the tension of the Christian life, isn’t it! We believe, and yet we also doubt. We trust in Him, but we also have our reservations, we have our concerns, we have those things that we’re not sure if we can really trust Him with. And therefore the appropriate prayer to pray, over and over again, is the prayer of that man in Mark 9, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

John Calvin wrote: “These two statements may appear to contradict each other; but there is none of us that does not experience both of them in himself. As our faith is never perfect, it follows that we are partly unbelievers; but God forgives us, and exercises such forbearance towards us, as to reckon us believers on account of a small portion of faith. It is our duty, in the meantime, carefully to shake off the remains of infidelity which adhere to us, to strive against them, and to pray to God to correct them, and, as often as we are engaged in this conflict, to fly to him for aid.”¹

We should be encouraged by examples of men and women who struggled in the same ways that we struggle. And it should also be an encouragement to us—a motivation to us—to press on in faith, to fight the fight of faith. We shouldn’t look at this and say, “Oh, well it’s OK to be fearful, because others have been fearful, too.” No! Instead, we should say, “Look at how awesome it is that Joseph of Arimathea stepped forward so boldly and had the privilege of being used by God in such a significant way!” He had been fearful, but God gave him the grace to be bold and risk-

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*.

taking and to have the joy of serving Jesus in this way. That should embolden us. That should spur us on to take great risks for the cause of Christ. Even if we're scared, even if there's a lot to lose, even if our reputation is at stake or even our very life, Jesus is worth it.

I challenge you this week to put yourself in the shoes of Joseph of Arimathea, and think about what that might look like in your life. What are you scared of? What are the pressures in your life that make you want to be a *secret* follower of Jesus, like Joseph was for some time? And then pray to God to give you the faith and the courage to be like Joseph was when he broke free from the bondage to that fear, and he went against the rest of the Sanhedrin, and he went to Pilate to request the body of Jesus. What might that kind of boldness look like in your life, as you interact with others in your family, in your neighborhood? What might this look like in the break room tomorrow at work, with your peers at school?

The Providence of God

Another fascinating aspect of this story is how we see the providence of God in all kinds of details in these events. Joseph of Arimathea is kind of a mysterious character. We wish we knew more about him. He shows up in each of the four Gospels, but the only place he appears is right here in the account of Jesus' burial. We're not told about him anywhere else. He's like Simon of Cyrene in this way. He appears for one seemingly small detail of the story, and then he's gone and we don't know anything else about him.

But doesn't this show us the providence of God? It was not a coincidence that the soldiers picked Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross. That was part of God's plan. Neither is it any coincidence that Joseph of Arimathea chose to bury Jesus' body. This was all part of the divine plan.

Isaiah 53:9 says, "And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth." This is an Old Testament prophecy written centuries before Jesus came to earth. And we have the details there already that the Suffering Servant would die with the wicked (there were criminals crucified on either side of Him) and also that He would be buried in a rich man's tomb. That's Joseph. The parallel account in Matthew says "there came a *rich man* from Arimathea, named Joseph . . ." So this is all in fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah 53. And it is yet another indication of Jesus' innocence. As the verse from Isaiah says, "he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth." Joseph recognized Jesus' innocence. That's why he trusted Jesus.

That's why he was a disciple. And that's why he wanted to give Jesus a proper burial. Pilate, too, recognized Jesus' innocence, and that's why he granted Joseph permission to take down Jesus' body and bury Him.

There's also the 3 predictions that Jesus made of His own death and resurrection. In Mark 8, 9, and 10, He told His disciples what was going to happen to Him. Here's what He said in chapter 10. "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise." (Mark 10:33-34, ESV)

This is the amazing providence of God in the story of redemption. Individuals are acting according to their own volition. They are doing what they want to do. From the chief priests and scribes, to Pilate, to Joseph of Arimathea. They are all doing what they want to do. They are exercising their free will, and they are responsible for their actions. They are not robots. And yet God's sovereign purposes are over it all. This is a mystery that we cannot fully comprehend, but we must accept. God is in control. God's providence is over every detail of history as He works out His plan of glorifying Himself and saving sinners. We should be in awe of our great God!

The Power of the Gospel

I want to close by talking about the power of the Gospel. It should strike us as quite the remarkable thing that someone like Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple of Jesus, even if it was secretly at first. Both Matthew and John say that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus. And we're told here in Mark that he was looking for the kingdom of God. He saw in Jesus the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. He saw that the kingdom had come in the person of Jesus Christ.

When we look at this against the backdrop of Joseph's peers, the grace of God shines forth brilliantly. Joseph's peers in the Sanhedrin were hard-hearted and blind to the reality of Jesus' identity. They refused to see Him for who He is. But by the grace of God, Joseph saw. And he even acted courageously to stand up to the rest of the Sanhedrin and to go boldly before Pilate to request Jesus' body. In spite of his peers, in spite of all that he had to lose, even in spite of the fact that Jesus had died (and therefore seemingly would not bring about the kingdom of God), Joseph still believed and followed. This is the power of the Gospel.

Just a few verses earlier, Mark recorded the amazing profession of faith made by the centurion. It was a miracle of God's grace that the centurion was able to see and believe that day.

God gave him spiritual insight to comprehend who Jesus is. It's no less of a miracle that Joseph of Arimathea was given spiritual eyes to see. These are remarkable conversions in different ways, and it shows God's power to save all kinds of people. We all have the same root problem, of course, which is sin. But our sin manifests itself in different ways, and we all have different experiences in life that set up various barriers to the Gospel.

For the centurion, he was a Gentile, pagan, soldier who had been hardened by a life of war and crucifixion. He had seen horrible things. He had done horrible things. He had inflicted much pain on others, and no doubt had experienced much pain himself. He was a sinner who deserved God's punishment. But God's sovereign grace poured down on him in that moment at the cross, and he believed!

For Joseph of Arimathea, he was not a war-hardened soldier. He came from a very different background. He was part of a very different group. The centurion was ignorant of God, but that was not the case for Joseph of Arimathea and his friends on the Council. They knew much about the God of the Bible. They knew the Scriptures. But they were blinded by spiritual pride. And that's why Joseph's conversion is just as miraculous as the centurion's.

God is powerful and gracious to save all kinds of sinners. He saves Jews and Gentiles. He saves the Pharisee and the centurion. He saves legalists and libertines. He saves religious folks and pagan folks. He saves those who foolishly think they can save themselves by keeping rules, and He saves those who hate rules and go out of their way to break them.

This is the power of the Gospel. Maybe you identify more with the centurion. You've had a difficult life. You have inflicted much pain and have experienced much pain. I pray that you will look to Jesus on the cross and say, "Truly, this man is the Son of God!"

Maybe you're more like the guys who were part of the Sanhedrin. Maybe you see yourself as a really religious person. You keep the rules. You live a good life, so you think. I pray that God will break into your life like He did with Joseph of Arimathea. I pray that you will look away from yourself and your supposedly-good deeds. Recognize your need for Jesus. Trust in Him and follow Him and take courage to serve Him even when there's risk involved. Go against the tide of peer pressure. Your religious friends, especially, might not like it, but be bold to tell them about the wonderful power of the Gospel.