

Introduction

1. In this year's Easter worship performance, I was asked to play the part of Joseph of Arimathea, one of the persons mentioned in this lesson's passage. It was a moving experience for me to contemplate and act out the role of Joseph in asking for and burying Jesus' dead body.
2. We move to the second of three important Christian doctrines concerning Jesus: He was dead and buried.
3. In this lesson we consider the significance of Jesus' burial for our faith in Him as Savior and Lord.
4. **Read Mk 15:42-47.**

A. Preparations for Burial (42-45)

1. These verses form the middle of our final Markan sandwich.
 - a. In our last lesson we laid the first slice of bread in our sandwich as we encountered the women who were witnesses of the death of Jesus on the cross.
 - b. In this lesson we fill the middle of the sandwich with the account of Jesus' burial.
 - c. In the next lesson will place the final slice of bread on our sandwich with Jesus' resurrection.
2. "It was Preparation Day" (42)
 - a. Jesus was crucified and died about 3pm on a Friday. We know it now as Good Friday.
 - b. The Jewish Sabbath begins when the first star becomes visible each Friday near sundown.
 - c. The Jews were commanded to do no work on the Sabbath as a day of rest (cf., Ex 35:1-3).
 - d. So, Friday was a Preparation Day for the Sabbath.
 - e. Jesus' body had to be taken down and buried before sundown and the start of Sabbath.
3. Asking the Permission of Pilate (43-44)
 - a. Who was Joseph of Arimathea? (43a)
 - 1) His name Joseph means "Yahweh adds" in Hebrew.
 - 2) All four gospels note that he was from "Arimathea," an unknown town likely near Jerusalem.
 - 3) Matthew adds that he was a "rich man" (Mt 27:57), which means he likely was a Sadducee, a rich priest and member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling Council. Matthew also calls him a "disciple of Jesus" (Gk., *ematheteuthe to Iesou*).
 - 4) John calls him a "secret disciple" (Gk., *mathetes tou Iesou kekrummenos*) (Jn 19:38).
 - 5) Mark also states that he was "a prominent member of the Council," that is the Sanhedrin.
 - 6) Most of his peers on the Council had condemned Jesus to death and were at the cross to mock and taunt Jesus (cf., Mk 15:31-32). Joseph did not agree with their decision.
 - 7) Mark notes that he ". . . was himself waiting (Gk., *prosdechomenos*) for the kingdom of God."
 - a) Jesus came proclaiming, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mk 1:15)
 - b) Joseph, like the other Jewish leaders, looked for the coming of God's Messiah to save Israel.
 - c) Joseph and Nicodemus (cf., Jn 3:1-21) saw Jesus differently from the other members of the Council. He was not a pretender but actually was the Messiah they longed for.
 - d) Even though Jesus was not the type of Messiah that they expected, they allowed God's Spirit to speak the truth to them about who Jesus was.
 - e) They allowed their pre-conceived ideas to be changed by the power of Jesus' words/actions.
 - f) Joseph sought God's truth and found it in Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life.
 - b. Joseph Goes Before Pilate (43b)
 - 1) Joseph went to Pilate and "asked for Jesus' body (Gk., *soma*)."
 - 2) Pilate controlled not only the living body of Jesus but also his corpse since He was a condemned criminal. Pilate was free to dispose of Jesus' body as he saw fit.
 - 3) James Brooks notes, "The Romans did not always permit the burial of executed criminals. Often their bodies were left on the cross to rot or be devoured by animals and birds. This was especially true if the victim had been convicted of treason. Among Jews, however, quick and decent burial of the dead, including enemies and criminals, was an act of piety (2 Sam 21:12-14; Tobit 1:17-19; 2:3-7; 12:12-13; Sir 7:33; 38:16; Josephus, *War* 3.8.5)" (James Brooks, *Mark*, 265).

4) The proscription for burial in Jesus' case is specified in Deuteronomy. "If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance" (Dt 21:22-23).

5) So why did Joseph ask for Jesus' body?

a) Jesus' disciples were not available, and His mother and the women at the cross had no standing to ask for Jesus' body.

b) I believe that Joseph did not want the humiliation of Jesus to continue with the indignation of a criminal's burial most likely in the garbage pit of the Hinnom Valley.

c) Joseph wanted to honor his Lord who had been dishonored in His death and took great personal risk in asking for Jesus' body since Jesus was a condemned traitor.

c. Pilate is Surprised (44)

1) "Pilate was surprised" to hear that Jesus was dead.

2) The word "surprised" (Gk., *ethaumasen*) is the same word Mark has used to describe the people's reaction to Jesus' miracles and teaching.

3) Normally, a person would last much longer than three hours on the cross. Some strong men lasted several days.

4) Pilate would not take Joseph's word that Jesus was dead. He wanted to make sure that Jesus was really dead and not just severely wounded.

5) So Pilate sent for the centurion (cf., Mk 15:39) who was in charge of the crucifixion to make sure that Jesus was dead.

6) The centurion confirmed that Jesus was dead. In fact, John's gospel records that one of the soldiers thrust a spear into Jesus' side to ensure that He was dead (cf., Jn 19:34).

3. Pilate Gives Jesus' Body to Joseph (45)

a. "[Pilate] gave the body (Gk., *ptoma*) to Joseph.

b. The word Mark uses for body (Gk., *ptoma*) in this verse means "corpse; dead body" and is different than the word for body (Gk., *soma*) used earlier in v. 43, which can refer either to a living or dead body.

c. Pilate's granting of Joseph's request may point to his earlier statements that Jesus was innocent (cf., Mk 15:14).

d. Warren Wiersbe concludes, "The fact that He was buried is proof that Jesus actually died on the cross, for the Roman officials would not have released the body without proof that Jesus was dead" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 183).

B. The Burial (46)

1. Preparing Jesus' body for burial

a. Hebrew Burial Customs

1) According to Jewish tradition, a dead body must be buried immediately before sundown. This was especially important since the Passover Sabbath was at hand.

2) Hebrew burial customs are first mentioned in Genesis with the burial of the Patriarch Abraham.

"Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, the field Abraham had bought from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried with his wife Sarah" (Gen 25:7-10).

a) A natural cave was used for as a burial tomb.

b) The body was placed in a chamber of the cave and allowed to decompose.

c) After a year, the family returned and "gathered" the bones of the deceased which were placed with the bones of their ancestors in a pile located elsewhere inside the cave.

3) Later, Jews, especially the wealthy, carved tombs in cliffs or old quarry sites.

4) The dead bodies of the poor, outcasts, and especially criminals would be thrown into the Hinnom Valley (i.e., Gehenna).

- 5) There is some archaeological evidence from the first century CE that the bones of the deceased were gathered after decomposition and placed in ossuaries, literally “bone boxes,” much as we today place remains of loved ones in urns today.
 - 6) In reality, our American burial customs today have more to do with Egyptian burial practices, which focused on preserving the body for the afterlife, than with Jewish customs.
 - b. Joseph most likely with help from Nicodemus (cf.,) and servants had made preparations for Jesus’ burial by gathering linen cloth to wrap the body and spices to preserve or at least help with the smell of decomposition.
 - c. John’s gospel records that “[Joseph] was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there” (Jn 19:38-42).
 - d. Joseph’s tomb was “cut out of rock” most likely in an old quarry or cliffside that had become a garden burial place. Traditionally, there are two sites for Jesus’ burial place.
 - 1) The Garden Tomb near Gordon’s Calvary
 - 2) Beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulcher
 - e. Joseph’s actions fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which declared, “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth” (Is 53:9).
2. Closing the Tomb
- a. Tombs were generally sealed with a large boulder or stone to keep out animals and grave robbers.
 - b. Some tombs had large stones of about 3’ diameter carved into a disk-like shape like a large millstone.
 - c. These carved stones would be rolled into place in a grooved channel that slanted down toward the opening. This made the stone easy to roll into place but hard to remove.
 - d. Joseph and his helpers made hasty preparations as the Sabbath was upon them. They sealed the tomb and planned to come back after the Sabbath to finish the work of burial.

C. The Witnesses (47)

1. Some of the same women who had been at the cross, “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph,” witnessed where Joseph buried Jesus.
 - a. They probably helped Joseph and Nicodemus prepare Jesus’ body for burial by washing it, and wrapping it with linen and spices.
 - b. As noted previously, their preparations were rushed because the day was waning and the Sabbath was beginning. They would have to come back later to complete the job.
 - c. These same women who had witnessed Jesus death (cf., Mk 15:40) now witnessed His burial. The chain of eye-witness testimony of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus continues.
 - d. These women will be important witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus as we close our Markan sandwich with the next lesson.
2. William Lane notes, “The detail that the women saw the place where Jesus’ body was laid to rest is primarily important because it confirms the identity of the tomb specified in Ch. 16:5 with that in which Jesus’ body was interred. The account of the burial thus finalizes the passion narrative and prepares for the report concerning the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning” (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 581).
3. So what is the significance of Jesus’ burial?
 - a. Read Romans 6:1-11.
 - 1) We believe Jesus had to die and be buried in order to be raised to new, resurrection life.
 - 2) We believe when we physically die in Christ that we will ultimately experience a resurrection like His.
 - 3) We believe that the power of Christ’s resurrection is alive in us now and enables us to live a life that is dead to sin and alive in Jesus.
 - b. The significance of Jesus’ burial for our faith is that unless Jesus died and was buried, then there would be no possibility of resurrection for anyone. That will be the topic of the next lesson.

D. Questions/Thoughts for Reflection

1. How would you respond to someone's claim that Jesus didn't really die on the cross? Why is this fact so important?
2. Are you, like Joseph, waiting on the kingdom of God? Are you willing to be part of it by receiving Jesus by faith and following Him by faith each day?
3. Like Joseph of Arimathea, what pre-conceived ideas about Jesus need to be changed by God's power at work in you?
4. Like Joseph, are you boldly proclaiming your faith in Jesus by your words and actions even if it costs you friendships, power, position, or others ridicule and slander you? Are you ready to pay the price?
5. Are you giving of your best to the Lord, as Joseph did by giving Jesus his own tomb? Are you giving Jesus not only your material wealth but also your spiritual gifts, talents, time, and abilities—that is your whole heart?