

A Rich Man's Grave

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[0 : 00] When we come to this particular passage that we just read, these short verses here, it's not as impactful as the previous two, right? In the last two passages that we've studied together in the last two weeks, we've looked specifically at the cross. We have gazed at the cross. We have seen the suffering of Christ that he endured for our sakes. And then we have seen the purpose of the cross, this perfect atonement, satisfying the wrath of God against sinners.

That's impactful. It's amazing for us to do that. We never tire of gazing at the cross. And then we come to this passage that seems, at least on the surface, to just, as we might say, be kind of filling in the gaps to just let us know what happened after Jesus died. He goes in the tomb just so that they can tell us that he came out of the tomb. But we must not treat this as less necessary or only incidental to the narrative. That's not what this is. We find in these verses another conflation of Mark's two primary themes. The first being the identity and purpose of Jesus.

He tells us that from the very beginning. He never leaves that. That's his primary purpose. But we've noted all along the way in the last two years, the second primary theme of Mark's gospel is faithful discipleship in response to the person and work of Jesus.

The Lord's burial does a few things for us. It verifies the reality of his death. It prepares the way for his promised resurrection, which he has at least on three different occasions in Mark's gospel plainly said that he will die and he will rise. And this helps prepare the way for that.

It fulfills Old Testament prophecy in Isaiah 53, as we'll get to again. And then it sheds more light on the nature of true discipleship. And I think it's for these reasons that the burial of Jesus, this entombment of Jesus in this passage, was an essential element of the apostles' preaching of the gospel. Remember Paul, when he's writing to the Corinthian church about the gospel, he writes in 1 Corinthians 15, I would remind you brothers of the gospel I preached, which you received and which you stand and by which you're being saved. In other words, let me just remind you real quick of the basic foundation of the gospel truth that saves you, the power of God unto salvation. And then he says in a couple of verses later that he delivered to them as a first importance, the things most important, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, Paul insists on putting in, in these matters of first importance, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. So it's not just that it's here to fill in the gaps. It's not just here to tell us another part of the story. It serves a purpose in the text. It serves a purpose in the things that God has determined for us to know about the person and the work of Jesus Christ. And so Mark's narrative of Jesus's burial does two things for us.

[3 : 20] It challenges our discipleship, and then it informs our faith. It challenges our discipleship, and then it informs our faith. And those are the two headings that we're going to use to guide us through this particular text. Okay? The first thing, if you want to keep notes in your journals, just write down challenging our discipleship, challenging our discipleship. Look with me at verse 42.

And when evening had come since it was the day of preparation, that is the day before the Sabbath. And let's just stop there for just a second. Here we have some necessary contextual notes that help us understand the scene just a little better, particularly as it relates to the timing of Jesus's death and his burial. So Mark explains to his Roman readers in this moment that this is the day of preparation. That's the day. That's a weekly day. That's every Friday for the Jews at this point. The day of preparation is preparing them for their Sabbath day when they're collecting all their things because they're going to rest on the Sabbath in observance of what God had told them to do. Evening here is a nod toward the approaching sunset, which at that time of year is probably about seven o'clock in the evening. Okay? Now remember what Mark had told us in our passage last week, that Jesus had died at three o'clock in the afternoon. And remember, Jews are reckoning their days, not from midnight to midnight like we do. They're reckoning their days from sunset to

sunset. Okay?

So they've got a very small window after Jesus's death to prepare his body in a way that would be suitable for some kind of burial. Probably only three to four hours between the time that he takes his final breath to the time that they cannot legally, in the sense of their Jewish law, actually be away from their homes and be handling dead bodies and things like that. In general, they have to finish this before the Sabbath begins. And so the timing is what accounts for the hurried nature of all of this. Why are they in such a hurry to do this with Jesus? Why are the women on Sunday morning coming back to the tomb with these spices? Because they didn't have enough time to prepare the body fully on Friday after Jesus's death. They had to stop it. The timing's necessary for us to understand what's happening. Now I want you to look at verse 43. Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. So Mark introduces us to this man. We haven't seen him yet in the narrative. His name is Joseph. He's from a town that probably is something like, if you're familiar with the Old Testament, something like Ramah, about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Mark tells us two important notes about him. One related to his political status, one related to his faith. So he's a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. That's what it tells us here. He's a respected member of the council. That's the same council that 12 hours earlier had actually condemned Jesus to die. They are ultimately responsible for this initial condemnation and delivering him over. Okay, Joseph is a part of this group. And he's not only a part of this group, he's a prominent leader among this group, we're told. But he's also said to have been, quote, looking for the kingdom of God, which in Mark's gospel has the connotation of faith and discipleship. Remember the message Jesus begins to preach as soon as he comes into Galilee in chapter one of Mark's gospel. Repent and believe the good news. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. That was the message Jesus preached in these three years. It was a message of the kingdom of God. And whenever we see that in Mark's gospel, it's always directly linked to this idea of faith in Christ, discipleship of Christ as people are considering him in terms of the kingdom. But the other three gospels help us to understand Joseph just a little better. Matthew 27 and verse 57 tells us that he was a rich man.

[7 : 51] This explains why Joseph was actually able to provide a tomb for Jesus to be buried in. Matthew also says that he was plainly a disciple of Jesus at this point in his life. Not in the sense of the 12 who were the chosen apostles, but in the sense that he at least on some level had become to, had come to believe in Jesus as this Messiah and son of God. Now Luke adds another layer to this. Luke 23 and verse 50 tells us that Joseph was a righteous man and that though he was a member of the council, the Sanhedrin, he had not consented to the condemnation of Jesus. So he's a prominent leader among them, but he did not consent to Jesus's death. He wasn't in on their sinfulness in this moment.

And if you can think back just a few weeks to our study of Jesus's trial, it's probably likely that Joseph wasn't even there. They wouldn't have needed all 70 members of the Sanhedrin. They just needed a quorum and they probably selected the people that they knew wouldn't give them a hard time. Perhaps Joseph isn't even present at that moment. Then John 19 tells us the thing that we really need to know here. John 19 verse 38 reveals that Joseph had kept his discipleship a secret and he had kept it a secret out of fear of the Jews. So he's a disciple of Christ, but he's unwilling to tell very many people that he is.

Now, nothing about crucifixion carried any kind of honor, not even a proper burial. Crucified criminals were typically left on the cross for days. They were there as a sign, a warning to other people not to commit the same crimes. They were left to be scavenged by animals. But Roman law did allow for family members of some criminals to request the body of their loved ones for burial. Pilate, who was never convinced that Jesus was actually guilty of the charges brought against him, was willing to let Jesus' body be handed over on this afternoon or in the early evening to the people who were with Jesus. But notice, it's not Jesus' family who has requested his body.

It's Joseph, the secret disciple from Arimathea, is the one who has requested his body. And the turning point in verse 43 is the simple phrase, he took courage. That's a distinct phrase here for Mark.

[10 : 43] Because what we know of Joseph and John is that he was not a courageous disciple. He's actually a weak disciple. A believer, but unwilling to let people know. Unwilling for people to

know that he had begun to follow Christ.

Joseph and after having lived out his discipleship in secret, afraid of what the Jews would do to his reputation and to his power, Joseph suddenly took courage and identified with Jesus in this moment in the most public way possible. And what is it that produces in Joseph this sudden courage and emboldens him in this moment? It was the impact of the cross.

It's only the gospel as revealed through the cross of Christ that can produce a true and open disciple.

And as Joseph is confronted in this moment after having followed Jesus in the shadows of secrecy, as he's confronted in this moment with the cross of Christ and the crucifixion of Christ, even if he hadn't put all the pieces together of what the significance of that was, suddenly the cross produces in him a courage that leads him to move out of his secrecy and to begin to identify with Jesus publicly. And Kent Hughes notes this. He says that Christ's courage begets our courage. His dedication, our dedication. His sacrifice, our sacrifice.

Which makes me wonder if you find your place, yourself in a place of perhaps somewhat spiritual complacency or plagued by the fear of what others may think of the faith that you have in Christ, the solution for you is to not go and find somebody that might convince you that it's not as bad as you think that it is. The solution is to look again at the cross. Because the only thing that will move us and motivate us to follow Christ more faithfully is the act of Christ on the cross and in his resurrection, the gospel is what gives us this motivation. And it motivates Joseph in this moment.

[13 : 05] A true disciple of Jesus cannot and will not exist on the fringes of the Christian community for long. Eventually believers will step out of the shadows to boldly identify and follow Jesus Christ.

And the thing that will ultimately pull us out of the shadows of secrecy is not the hope of a better life or the prospect of earthly pleasures. That's a heresy in our culture that says that if you will just follow Christ, things will get better for you. That if you will just be a faithful disciple, he will give you the desires of your heart, whatever it is you want, he'll pour it out on you in those moments. But no, that's not what the Bible teaches. It's not the hope of a better life and of earthly pleasures that pulls us out of the shadows. God promises neither of those things in this life.

The only thing that will lead to open identification with Jesus and faithful discipleship is the power and purpose of the purpose of the cross. Remember, put this episode with Joseph in the context of what Jesus said was the marks of true discipleship in Mark chapter 8. If anyone would come after me, Jesus says, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And this cross bearing thing now takes on a whole different dimension as we come through Mark chapter 15. When we understand the petibulum that we talked about a few weeks ago that would have been placed on Jesus's shoulder and then eventually on Simon of Cyrene's shoulders to carry it to the place of his crucifixion, it's this picture of discipleship on the road, the road of shame and of humiliation and of hardship and of suffering.

Jesus says, that's what I want you to identify. And if you're going to follow me, that's exactly what you're going to end up doing. You're going to end up walking the path that I have walked all the way to the cross, he says. But then Jesus continues in Mark 8, for whoever would save his life will lose it.

But whosoever loses his life for my sake in the gospels will save it. For what does it profit, Jesus says, for a man to gain the whole world, but forfeit his soul? Now I want you to think about Joseph of Arimathea in conjunction with that statement from Jesus. He had everything a first century Jew could have hoped for. He had wealth, he had power, he had fame, he was respected, he was honored, he was one of the people that whether he wanted him or not, would have received greeting after greeting after greeting after greeting as he walked through the markets. And as he walked down the street, he had everything a first century Jew would want out of this life.

[16 : 06] And his secrecy was due to his fear that by publicly following Jesus, he would lose everything that he had come to love, that he would lose his life as Jesus said. But as he gazes at the visage of the gospel hanging on the cross, Joseph realized that there was nothing in this life worth holding on to.

If it meant he'd miss the Christ and lose his soul. And there's two ways to apply that. There's first the sense of what happens in the moment of conversion when we're saved. And it reminds me of what Jesus said in another passage when he gave the parables about the kingdom of God. And I reference these often, but just bear with me again, because it's so helpful to be reminded of. Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field.

And a man walking through the field happens upon the treasure, and he's so impacted by the immeasurable value of this treasure that he sells everything that he has in order to buy that land and have that treasure.

And Jesus immediately follows it with another illustration. And he says, it's also like the merchant who going through the market finds the pearl of great price, the pearl of immeasurable value. And in doing that, he sells his whole business, everything that he has in that moment, he sells it all in order that he could have this one pearl of immeasurable value, incalculable value.

[17 : 41] And Jesus's point is that he is that treasure. He is that great pearl. And when we come back and we see as called a discipleship, what we find is that what Jesus is calling us to, the only way that we can have that true treasure is by abandoning all else in order to have it, in order to receive him.

It just makes me wonder if there's, perhaps there's someone in here and in a metaphorical sense, you're walking through that field today, or you're browsing through that market, and God in his grace has opened your heart to see that there is immeasurable value in the person of Christ and what he has done in providing salvation for us. And all that's left for you to do is to forsake everything else, forsake the sin of your life and forsake the pride of your life and let it go to confess Christ and to follow him as a faithful disciple.

But then there's this application that we see here in Joseph's life, who I believe was already a follower of Christ, at least in the sense of as much as he could be in his faith at this point.

And at this point, it's a little different than at the moment of salvation. This call to discipleship is something we must hear every morning when we get out of bed. Who are you going to save your life today? Are you going to follow Christ today?

And in this moment, Joseph is impacted in such a way that he's willing to let go of all the things he loved the most in this life in order to identify with Jesus.

[19 : 28] Alistair Begg said, either your secrecy will destroy your discipleship or your discipleship will destroy your secrecy. And I think that's what we see happening with Joseph.

Some of us have been trying to live out our discipleship in the shadows. But Jesus calls us out of this. And if the gospel has truly changed us, we will inevitably take up this cross with all its shame and follow Jesus on the path of suffering if need be.

Jesus says, this is actually the mark of a true Christian. So Sinclair Ferguson says, Joseph realized that no one can remain a secret disciple of Jesus indefinitely.

There invariably comes a point at which we must burn our boats and cross our bridges. It may be when his real significance dawns on us and us with special power.

Or it may be when others publicly reject Jesus and we must confess him, that we will stand with him whatever the cost. But in any event, Sinclair says, every disciple must stand up to be counted.

[20 : 45] And I want to ask you before we move on and wrap this text up. Are you being counted? Are you trying to live in the shadows?

Worried about what might happen if I truly do profess my faith before my family? If I truly do profess my faith before my friends? If I do as coffee and those other people and endeavor to take this gospel to others in the community around me, am I willing to come out of the shadows to do that? And I think if you know Christ at some point, you will inevitably be willing to do just that. Because either your secrecy is going to reveal that you're not really a true disciple.

Or the work of God in your life as a true disciple is going to overcome your secrecy at some point. Well, that's challenging our discipleship.

That's the longest part. We'll move quickly through the final part. Informing our faith. Informing our faith. There's three ways that this passage informs our faith.

[21 : 54] It strengthens our belief that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and that what he did was true and sufficient for providing salvation. So let's work through it.

The first thing I want you to see is just a simple phrase, truly dead, truly dead. Look at verse 44. Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have died.

And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph.

So notice that Pilate's surprise here is owing to the fact that crucifixions could last up to two or three days before the criminals actually died.

It's really kind of interesting as you look at the historical data that is available just on this process of execution. There are some cases that are so extreme that the criminals never actually even made it to the cross, that they were treated so harshly as far as the execution was concerned.

[23 : 01] And then there's other cases where, actually probably more standard cases, where they survived the flogging that gets them to the cross and then they're left there for two to three days until their bodies just can't go any longer and they die in that moment.

So Pilate here is surprised in that someone that was asking for his body just a few hours after Pilate had condemned him was actually very unusual. But again, Jesus's life wasn't taken from him. Jesus gave his life. And there's an important distinction in that. There was no moment in this where Jesus is out of control. There is no moment in this where his death and his sacrifice is outside of his own power.

The reason he cries out from the cross, my God, into your hands, I commit my spirit, is precisely because Jesus was in control of his own fate.

So he doesn't have his life taken from him by the Romans. He gives his life over to the Romans. They were the instruments of his execution, but he gave up his spirit after his atoning work was done.

[24 : 14] And that's important for us to remember here. So Pilate's surprised. Pilate's surprised that he's dead. And there's been attempts throughout history, even dating back to the early first and second centuries, that have tried to refute Jesus's resurrection by saying that he never actually died.

And you could probably find some people who would try to suggest this same thing today, that there's no way someone could raise from the dead, but there's so much evidence, there's so much even historical evidence about people who truly believed in the resurrection that says that they saw the resurrected Christ and ended up giving their lives for that truth in the apostles.

There's so much historical evidence that they thought Jesus rose from the dead, but the truth is he never actually died. They say he just swooned on the cross. He perhaps fainted at some point, and nobody really realized in the process of hurrying to get him in a tomb that he was actually still alive. So what happens on Sunday, they would say, is not a resurrection, it's a resuscitation, they would say. But Mark's account clearly shows that Jesus was truly dead.

Let me point out to a few things that maybe strengthens your faith in this. Notice that Pilate confirms Jesus's death with the centurion responsible for it.

[25 : 35] Remember, they did this in squads, execution squads of five people, four ordinary soldiers, one centurion who is responsible for them. This man was a professional executioner.

He knew very well the difference between a person who is dead and a person who is simply unconscious. So to confirm, Pilate doesn't call one of Jesus's disciples to ask them whether or not Jesus is dead.

No, he calls the person who knows whether or not a person is actually dead. And he says, tell me whether or not he's actually already died. And remember, the centurion says, yeah, he's dead. Now, John gives us a little more information about this in John chapter 19.

He tells us that to speed up the process of death, the Jews had requested for the criminal's legs to be broken so that they could dispose of the bodies prior to sunset and the Sabbath.

This would have made it impossible. The reason they would have done this, it would have made it impossible for them to breathe, essentially, and they would have quickly died. The centurion agreed to this in John 19, and then he goes one by one to break the legs, and he comes to Jesus, and he realizes Jesus is actually already dead.

[26 : 52] So he doesn't break the legs of Jesus. They run a spear up the side of Jesus. They pierce his vital organs in this moment to make sure that he's dead.

And then Pilate calls him a few moments later and says, is he really dead? And this same centurion who's just run a spear up his side says, yeah, he's dead. There's no doubt about it.

He's dead. Now, we should not overlook either that a few different people, in addition to the centurion, likely handled the body of Jesus.

Joseph's a rich man. John 19 says Nicodemus joins him in this process, so that's at least two people involved here. Joseph probably doesn't do it himself.

We probably should read it in the causative sense, meaning that he used his servants to carry out this task that he oversaw. So we're talking multiple people handling the body of Jesus to take him

off the cross, washing his body, which would have been a part of the process of this burial custom for the Jews.

[27 : 58] John 19 says Nicodemus had some spices, and perhaps they did a little bit of that in that moment, and they wrap him in the shroud, and then they actually carry him to the nearby tomb where they're gonna lay him in this moment. Many people handling the body of Jesus.

You're telling me that in the process of three hours of handling this body, nobody realized that he was actually dead? No, he's dead. James Edwards says it's further worth recalling that the Romans crucified hundreds of thousands of individuals during their centuries in power, and not one of those individuals is recorded as surviving the cross.

Not one. The grim fact, he says, is proof positive that chapter 16 is not about resurrection. It's about resurrection from the dead.

So we see this challenge to our discipleship, and now we see this informing strengthening of our faith. Look at the evidence that the scripture gives us. It's there. Truly dead.

Quickly, number two, scripture fulfilled. Scripture fulfilled. Verse 46, and Joseph brought a linen shroud, taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock, and he rolled a stone against the tomb, the entrance of the tomb.

[29 : 23] So as I said earlier, it was not typical for someone crucified to be buried, but even if they were, it's doubtful that they would have had a similar burial to Jesus. Joseph put him in his own tomb, a new tomb that the other gospel authors tell us has never been used before.

It's nearby to the place of crucifixion. We know there was a cemetery near the place that would have been called Golgotha in those days. It would have been quick for them to get him to that place.

It's a biblical symbol for royalty. Do you remember the day that Jesus rode the donkey into Jerusalem?

Remember it was a cult that had never been ridden before? Remember some of the significance of that, is that that was reserved for royalty in the Old Testament. I think there's a picture here that as Jesus is put in a tomb that has never been used, it's a sign of royalty.

It's a symbol of his lordship in this moment. The fact that it has a rolling disc to cover the door instead of just a block wedge to shove into the opening of the tomb is just a further indication that this was a costly tomb, probably magnificent in the way that it has been cut out of the rock.

[30 : 42] I've got a couple pictures I can show you. Just maybe this would be helpful to you. If you just want to throw up that first one. This is not the tomb of Jesus. This is a garden tomb in Jerusalem. Evidence suggests that this couldn't be the place where Jesus was actually laid.

But this is a fine example of what this tomb would have been like. Except I want you to imagine that instead of having an opening that you could walk through, this opening would have only come down about a third of the way.

This has been opened up so that people visiting could actually walk in and see it. And then once you get inside, if you want to show that next picture, Becky, this would be a portion of the inside. So these are family tombs. So a body would be embalmed and it would be placed over here on the side. And then after the process of decomposition, they would come and they would get the bones and they would put them on shelves.

And then the next person in the family that dies, they go through the same process and it becomes a family tomb in this moment. This particular tomb, if you trust archaeological dating, dates back to the 7th or 8th century BC.

[31 : 46] So long before Jesus ever came, which would deny the fact that it hadn't been used before Jesus. So it's probably not the one that Jesus was in, but it is one very similar to the way the Gospels describe the tomb that Jesus would have been put in.

Okay? I want you to think about this for a moment. R.C. Sproul suggested that Jesus' death was the end of his humiliation and his burial was the first sign of his exaltation.

Notice everything changes with the way that Jesus' body is treated here. He's cleaned up. He is wrapped in the shroud. He's put in a tomb that's never been used. That's an intriguing thought. But I think the primary emphasis here is on the fulfillment of the Scripture. For several weeks, we've been paralleling Mark's gospel account with Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 53.

Isaiah 53 in verse 9. And they made his grave with the wicked and with the rich man in his death, although he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth.

[32 : 48] And it's a simple no, but an important one. We cannot overestimate the value of the Old Testament to the preaching of the Gospel. Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Scriptures.

And every fulfillment is a gift of God meant to strengthen our faith. It informs our faith. Okay? Truly dead. Scripture fulfilled. Finally, we're done. Eyewitness testimony.

Eyewitness testimony. Look at verse 47. Then Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joseph, saw where he was laid.

So here's the women that we saw last week. We'll see them again next Sunday. The point? Nothing is more valuable in establishing a fact than credible eyewitness testimony.

And these two women, along with many others, were present at Jesus' crucifixion. They're present in the process of his burial. They will be the first ones to his tomb on Sunday to find that it's empty.

[33 : 53] And Mary Magdalene, in particular, to see the Lord herself. And it may seem like a small thing, but it's not a coincidence that these same women are noted by the Gospel authors each step of the way.

Because of their testimony, we know the truth about Jesus' death and resurrection. Their faithfulness is our blessing because their testimony assures us that these things are true.

And then to further validate that, remember that the culture that they lived in would not have received a woman's witness as credible. So for anyone that would say, Mark just made this stuff up. Well, if he wanted to convince you of something in the first century, and he wanted it to be a credible convincing, he would have never used women in this position. Because nobody would have accepted that as credible.

But isn't it amazing how God, in the person of Joseph of Arimathea, and then in these women once again at the tomb, uses the people that no one else would have likely chosen to use.

[35 : 06] And he does it with great glory to himself. And what does that end up doing for us? It informs our faith. It strengthens our faith.

That as you open up as a public professing disciple of Christ, and someone stands to challenge you on the truth of who Jesus is, God has given us what we need.

This passage isn't a gap filler. That's not what this is. This isn't just incidental to the narrative. Mark wasn't writing this and saying, you know what, I might as well put a note in about the resurrection, because I don't think chapter 15 is long enough already.

No. This is essential to the gospel. It helps our faith. It helps our proclamation of who Jesus is. So the narrative of Jesus' burial may at first seem mundane, but it so helpfully challenges our temptations to secrecy.

And then it strengthens our faith in his gospel. And the only thing left for us to do is to respond accordingly. Believe him, and then faithfully follow him.