

# The service of Joseph

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Date: 24 October 2013

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, seeking God's blessing upon his word and praying that the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts may be acceptable in his sight, let us turn back to that portion of scripture that we read in Mark's Gospel, chapter 16.

And we read again at verse 42, verses 42 and 43. And now, when the evening was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, an honourable counsellor, which or who also waited for the kingdom of God, came and went in boldly unto Pilate and craved or asked for the body of Jesus.

It is difficult for us, perhaps 2,000 years after this event, to even begin to imagine the depth of despair and disillusionment and disappointment that the disciples and followers of Jesus were experiencing at this moment in history and in their history.

The one on whom they had pinned all their hopes was there before them, nailed to a cross on the Mount of Calvary, having just given up the ghost and died.

We had hoped, said the two disciples on the way to Emmaus on the evening of the resurrection day, we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.

[ 1 : 46 ] And it seemed that even his enemies, principally the chief priests and the Pharisees, expected more from him. He saved others, they said, but he cannot save himself.

Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come now down from the cross that we may see and believe in him. But there he remained, a broken, bruised and lifeless corpse on the cross.

If normal custom was to be followed, his body would be left there to rot and then eventually thrown into a mass grave, along with criminals and other malefactors.

The disciples, with the honourable exception of John, the beloved disciple, had all forsaken him and fled.

Only a small band of faithful women stood watching the cross from a distance, as both safety and Jewish convention demanded.

[ 2 : 47 ] How grateful, what a sense of indebtedness the church should have to the band of faithful, its band of faithful women, down to the generations.

But these women were powerless to help. But in the very midst of the darkness and desolation of the hour, we are told about this man, Joseph of Arimathea, who came forward to perform this noble deed, who found courage and did for Jesus in death what he was afraid to do for him in life, that is, during his earthly ministry.

It was this man, we could say, who took the first step towards the preparation for the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is interesting that it was another Joseph, Joseph from Nazareth, who shielded and protected the infant Jesus at the beginning, shortly after he was born, by taking him and his mother down to Egypt to escape the clutches of the wicked king Herod.

And here we find another Joseph, Joseph from Arimathea, taking possession of Christ's body and with loving care, laying it in his own tomb, hewn out of a rock.

[ 4 : 18 ] And out of that tomb, our Savior was to rise in his resurrection power, in triumph over death and the grave with all that that means for countless generations of believers, including ourselves here tonight.

John tells us in his own gospel that this man, Joseph, was, up till now at least, a secret disciple.

And I believe that this incident is recorded in the Gospels for a special purpose. That is, to encourage other secret disciples.

And there are many of them in our congregations to encourage them, many of them who deep down in their own hearts love the Lord Jesus and have an affection for his word, for his church and

his people, but have not yet found the courage to profess that love openly. Perhaps you are among them tonight. I would like us then to look for a short while at Joseph's noble deed and service.

[ 5 : 30 ] And we can look at it in four ways. First of all, the restraint on his service. And secondly, the encouragement to service that he received.

And thirdly, the nature of the service he rendered. And finally, the blessings of that service. Firstly, then, the restraint on his service and witness.

John tells us in his own gospel that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews. He was a disciple, one who had been taught by Jesus and who had learned something of him and from him.

That's what the word disciple means. He was not one, of course, of the special disciple group, the 12th or perhaps even the 70th group mentioned in Luke's Gospel, whom Jesus sent out, sent ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.

No, no. Joseph would be one of those who followed at a distance, making sure that he covered his tracks and that no one could even suspect that he had formed, that he had found something special in this prophet from Nazareth.

[ 6 : 51 ] There must have been a day when he had first met and heard Jesus, and it obviously had a profound effect on him. And so from that day on, Joseph became a follower, a disciple of Jesus, albeit secretly.

But Mark tells us something else here about Joseph. He was, he says, waiting for the kingdom of God. He was a man who was yearning for and looking for the establishment of God's reign upon earth.

And his hopes for that were penned on this man, Jesus of Nazareth, and he believed that he was the promised Messiah.

Perhaps there are some here, as there are in every congregation, who are waiting for the kingdom of God, waiting for God to break into their own hearts and lives.

And to do something special, a great act of renewal and revival and regeneration. But alas, there was a but in this man's discipleship.

[ 8 : 06 ] He was yearning and waiting for the kingdom of God. He was a disciple, but secretly, secretly, says John, for fear of the Jews.

Now remember that Joseph was a rich man and a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. And his colleagues on the Sanhedrin would not hesitate to criticize and denounce him if they suspected he had an allegiance to Christ.

He was perhaps remembering what happened to his friend Nicodemus, himself a fellow counsellor, counsellor, who had spoken up in the Sanhedrin. He said, when those in the Sanhedrin were condemning Christ, Nicodemus said, is it lawful for us to judge a man before we hear him and know what he has done and is doing?

And then they said to him, they rounded on him and said, are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has ever come out of Galilee.

And so he held back from making public profession of his faith in Jesus for fear of the Jews. I wonder how many people have been held back and restrained from witness and service to the Lord Jesus by fear in its many forums.

[ 9 : 36 ] especially for many people fear of fear of other people, fear of what their companions will say, other colleagues at work, their acquaintances, even, dare I say it, members of our own households.

And perhaps this is especially true in the case of young people. To be a Christian is considered counter-cultural. It's not cool to be a Christian.

Although, although, and we have to say this, there are encouraging signs as we know. And young people, many young people are coming to faith in Christ.

And many, you know, schools, the numbers in the Scripture Union and in Bible study classes are increasing and young people are coming and we rejoice and we give thanks to God for the great work that is being done among our young.

And so fear keeps people back, doesn't it? We are so apt to be looking at others and wondering what they will think or do. Perhaps there was something of that spirit in Peter.

[10:47] Remember in John chapter 21 when Lord, when Jesus came and met the disciples there on the shore of the lake of Galilee and Peter said to Jesus, Lord, what about this man?

What about this disciple here? And Jesus said, what is that to you? You follow me. That is the main thing. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

Never mind what's going on around. Never mind what others are going to think. You follow me. But there is another fear that disables and discourages and restrains us.

And that is fear of ourselves. Fear of our weaknesses, our frailties, our inability to sustain an effective witness.

Oh, people say, even if I become a member of the church or profess the Lord Jesus publicly, I just cannot sustain it. I cannot do it in my own strength.

[11:55] Well, none of us can do it in our own strength. But in God's strength and by the sufficiency of his abundance, of his abundant grace, we have to remind ourselves constantly of God's promise and assurance to his believing people, my grace is sufficient for you.

My strength is made perfect in your weakness. So then, the restraint on Joseph's witness and service.

And then we see here the encouragement that he received. So what was it then that galvanized Joseph into action and endowed him with such wonderful courage?

Hitherto, cowardice and the fear of the Jews had deprived him of the greatest privilege of declaring himself a disciple. But now he was faced with a dilemma.

Was Christ's body to be allowed to become a prey to vultures and dogs and to be cast into some unknown grave? Well, his answer was an emphatic no.

[13:06] No. God had a man ready for the hour and that man was Joseph. And Joseph looked at that cross and the one who hung there and fear seemed to fall away from him like a cloak.

The cowardice, the fear, the hesitation, the concealment were all gone and in their place came a new commitment and a new devotion.

You see, the man who had been afraid when Jesus was alive declared for him in a way that everyone could see as soon as he was dead. Jesus had not been dead on the cross one hour before his own prophecy came through.

What did he say? And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto him. The magnetism of the cross had already begun to act.

The power of the cross was already turning the coward into the hero and the waverer into the man who had taken his irrevocable decision for Christ.

[14:16] And it is still true, dear friends, that the cross is the place of decision for every secret disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is where the question must be answered. Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King? This is where we see manifested in all its glory the wondrous love of God for sinners such as you and I.

And oh, how Christ's humiliation and suffering and shame rebukes our indifference and faint-heartedness.

Are we ashamed when we look through the eyes of faith at that cross and at all that he endured for us and for how little that we do for him?

Yes, God's love is a wondrous love, but it is a love that makes demands upon us. That lovely hymn that we sometimes sing sums it all up.

[15:20] When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain, I count but loss and poor contempt on all my pride.

Where the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands, demands my soul, my life and my all.

And so Joseph sees clearly what he must do. Yes, he was a secret disciple, but now when it is almost too late, he redeems himself by an open and daring declaration of his attachment to Jesus.

The cross became the source of encouragement for him to witness and serve. And that self-same cross can be the encouragement for us also to witness and service for him.

And then thirdly, we see the nature of the service that he rendered. Now Joseph, as well as being a worthy counsellor and a secret disciple, he was, as we have already said, he was a rich man.

[16:38] He had a lot to lose, certainly in terms of worldly prestige and power, but he also had a lot to give. With his wealth, influence and rank, he could have been a great help to the cause of Christ

before now.

But you see, God was opening a door of opportunity for him, even now, in order to be of service to the Saviour. and Joseph thought of the tomb that he had prepared for the day of his own burial, hewn out of a rock.

And Mark says that he went boldly into the presence of Pilate, the Roman governor, with a request for the body of Jesus. And it must have taken some courage to approach someone so temperamental and unpredictable and unstable as Pilate.

This was the man, remember, who had mingled the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices, who had washed his hands symbolically and said, away with this man, take him away, out of my sight. Joseph was surely foolhardy to go into the presence of this man with such a bold request. He could have done anything to him. Would you have gone?

[ 18 : 01 ] Would I have gone? Well, that's a difficult question to answer, but you see, this was the only way that Joseph could effectively render the service that God was calling upon him to render.

And dear friends, whatever we do for Jesus privately and secretly, this is what he is calling upon us to do publicly.

Confess me, he says, before men, before the world. For whosoever, he said, confesses and acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.

And is that confession not at the very heart of the command that he has given us and which is so very relevant to us at this time and at this communion season?

do this, do this in remembrance of me. And so with God-given courage then, Joseph went forward boldly and asked Pilate for the body of Jesus.

[ 19 : 12 ] And did you notice how easy and straightforward the whole thing turned out to be? There was no hassle, no angry words, no resistance.

Pilate simply asked the centurion whether Jesus was already dead. And having ascertained that, he gave permission for him to take his body away.

And Joseph went out, took down the sacred body from the cross, wrapped it in clean linen, and laid it in his own tomb. and his name went down in scripture and will be there until the end of time.

Joseph is numbered among those who rendered a great service to the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, Joseph was a rich man and out of his riches he was prepared to render the best possible service to Jesus.

what kind of service, I wonder, are we rendering to Jesus? Do we say as the hymn writer, O not for thee, my weak desires, my poorer, baser part, O not for thee, my fading fires, the ashes of my heart?

[ 20 : 33 ] Is that how it is with us? Is it the ashes of our hearts? Or may it rather be the glory of our prime and the fullness of our heart?

So then, the nature of the service that he rendered. And then, finally, we see here the blessings of this witness and service.

Now, I am quite sure, and I hope I'm right in saying this, that Joseph never fully realized the significance of his service or the blessings that would flow from it.

He never imagined that it was in his tomb that the most momentous event in the history of the world was to take place. That a dead man was to come alive again in resurrection power and live on in the power of an endless life.

That it was in the resurrection, that Calvary and all that took place there was to be sealed and crowned in the glory of the new creation with all its blessings and privileges for generations yet unborn, including ourselves here this night.

[ 21 : 57 ] And notice also, notice also that there was the blessing of support and fellowship for Joseph at the very outset of his service.

John tells us that it was with the help of Nicodemus, who, like himself, had suddenly found courage and became quite careless of the consequences, that it was with the help of Nicodemus that Joseph took down the body of Jesus and laid it in the tomb.

Friends, while you and I stand up and take a stand for Jesus, there will be others to help and support and encourage us, loved ones and friends and the closest friend of all, the Lord Jesus Christ, by our side, being with us, saying don't be afraid, I am with you, I am beside you, I will never leave you or forsake you, I will strengthen you and uphold you.

And sometimes, you know, we will receive support and encouragement from those we least expect. Remember hearing someone telling a story about a man called Jim Bowes, who was Jim Bowes? Jim Bowes was a hitman for that notorious gangster, Al Capone. Al Capone might have been surprised to hear his name mentioned at the communion in Garapost, but we all, some of us have heard of him, he was a notorious gangster in America and he thought nothing of killing people and this man, he was a hitman for Al Capone, Al Capone would give him instructions to go out and kill this man and the next man.

[ 23 : 54 ] But then, one night, Jim Bowes went to a gospel meeting with a friend and he was wonderfully converted. But then came the problem, how was he going to break the news to Al Capone?

and so for nights, he never slept, he was tossing and turning and he was in an agony of mind and spirit, what would he do?

But he said to him, well, his wife eventually said to him, you've got to go and tell him, tell him of the decision that you have made and the change that has come in your life, no matter what it costs you. And he went and he went in and he said Al Capone was there at his desk and he told him, I am no longer, I have been converted, I have come to accept Christ as my saviour.

I regret everything that I ever did by killing innocent people and I'm no longer willing to do it. And he was waiting for Al Capone to put his hand in the drawer and bring out a gun and shoot him.

[ 25 : 02 ] But instead, Al Capone stood there and there were tears streaming down his cheek. He looked at him and said, it's all right, Jim, it's all right, just go the way you have chosen and I hope that all goes well for you.

Support from unlikely places. But oh, dear friends, let me say this in closing, the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus, in the present and in the future.

here we have a foretaste of heaven. But I have not seen nor ear heard nor have entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those who love him.

It is he alone, it's him alone who can satisfy the deepest needs and longings of our immortal souls. son. Which of us here tonight who have come to Jesus did not find in him infinitely more than we ever expected?

Oh, yes, like the Queen of Sheba, we can say we were not told the half of it. this world has nothing to offer you and me compared with the joy of knowing Jesus as Saviour and the privilege of serving him and witnessing for him.

[ 26 : 33 ] So here we have it then, Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple whom God brought to a new commitment and an open discipleship through Christ's death on the cross.

And may the sight of that cross and the reality of Christ's suffering inspire us all and especially any secret disciples amongst us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is our reasonable service. Let us like Joseph go forward boldly in his name and in his strength and say I'm not ashamed to own my Lord or to defend his cross.

Maintain the glory of his name and honour all his laws. May God enable us by spirit to do that if we have not already done so.

Let us pray together. Godafter