

# Dead And Buried

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I know there's some people here for the first time who didn't stand up and say so, and I don't want to embarrass them, but if any of you don't know Ralph Lewis, I'll introduce you to him after.

We'll do it now. All right. I know this is my first time coming. I'll follow Harry and him who he follows. Okay. Thank you. This passage today concludes Luke 23, and it's, again, an amazing passage. You remember that in the course of looking at the 23rd chapter, we've seen Herod and Pilate and Barabbas, and we've seen the women who approached Jesus on his way to the crucifixion. We've seen the good thief. All these characters that come through the weaving together of the story of the crucifixion in Luke 23.

So last week, Christ said, Into thy hands I commit my spirit. He died, and it spoke of the witnesses, the centurion, and how he recognized that truly this man was the Son of God, those who went away beating themselves on the breast, the women who'd come down from Galilee, and there the picture seems to fade out.

[ 1 : 39 ] And Luke picks up the story again with this passage when he says, There was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea.

This is the only reference to him in the whole of Scripture is the story which we're telling today and which is actually paralleled in the other three Gospels with some changes, as you'll see, some differences in the account.

But what happens is that you have Joseph of Arimathea, who is a fairly unique kind of person in the pages of the New Testament.

He came from what is now an unknown town, though it's suspected to be the same place that Samuel came from, but archaeology has lost the location, and nobody is quite sure where it was. He is very obviously an aristocrat, which would be necessary for him to be a member of the ruling council or Sanhedrin. He was socially elite and very prominent.

[ 2 : 54 ] He was a wealthy man. He was a good man. He was a righteous man. And he was looking for the kingdom. So that he was a very distinguished citizen of Jerusalem.

And was in some senses quite a prominent kind of person in the whole structure. The fact that he was a good man, remember, was because he had those kinds of relationships with people, that he was recognized in his human relationships to be a good man.

The fact that he was a righteous man, meant that in his relationship to God, he was fulfilling the demands of the law as best he was able, and therefore was, in the model at least of the Pharisees, a righteous man.

So he was good in terms of his relationship to others. He was righteous in terms of his relationship to God. And those two things perhaps need to go together.

In fact, inevitably are locked together, I think, by the first and great commandment, that you're to love God and your neighbor. And you know how often it happens within the realm of the pious, that there are those who are very devout in their relationship to God, but whose relationships to people stink.

[ 4 : 23 ] And there are people who are very good in their relationship to their fellow man, whose relationship to God is odiferous, I guess in the same way. So this man had them both together.

And the interesting thing about him was that he was a member of the council. The council were the 70 men who ruled Jerusalem.

They were the high court, and they were the people who came together to make the decisions. The council, if you read back in Luke chapter 22, had met during the night, being summoned by the chief priests, in order to hear the evidence against Jesus.

Now whether they had come together once or twice during the night, is not certain from the text. But during that time, false witnesses came up and accused Jesus, and they in effect heard the evidence.

And they had already determined what they wanted to happen, and they accumulated the evidence through these preliminary trials in the night.

[ 5 : 35 ] Then first thing in the morning, they held a formal meeting of the council in order to confirm the sentence which they had arrived at by extracting evidence during the course of the night.

Now, they had by dawn determined what they were going to do, and only needed this meeting of the council in order to forward it.

So they forced, they passed sentence on Jesus that morning. They took him then to Pilate to tell him that this man was worthy of crucifixion, and to see if Pilate would have the sentence carried out. And remember, Pilate started to try and dodge what they were asking him to do, sent him off to Herod, washed his hands, offered them Barabbas, and all the time, the pressure of the council's decision kept hammering at them, this man must be crucified, until finally it says, and Pilate turned him over to be crucified, washing his hands, saying that he was innocent of the blood of this just man.

Well, it says about Joseph, with respect to this whole proceeding, that he had not consented to their purpose and deed.

[ 6 : 59 ] And whether it was through absence from it, whether it was that he wasn't notified of the meeting, and they could make up a quorum without him, or whether he had chosen to absent himself when he saw the direction the proceedings were going, Luke is very clear in saying about him that he had not consented to their purpose and deed.

And he had good reason not to consent. First, because it was the law that you could not have a trial on a capital offense run at night.

Secondly, you could not pass sentence at night. Even if the trial had gone on during the day, you could not pass sentence that night.

Thirdly, if the trial was heard on one day, there had to be a whole day elapsed before sentence could be given.

And for all those irregular proceedings and watching what the council was determined to do in putting Jesus to death, it says of Joseph that he had not consented to their purpose and deed.

[ 8 : 16 ] And it says one more thing about him, which I think is a very significant thing, and that was that he was looking for the kingdom. You will remember, perhaps, that at the very beginning of Jesus' life, when he was eight days old, he was taken to the temple for the rite of circumcision.

And as he was carried to the temple by his parents, they were met by an old man whose name was Simeon. And Simeon took this child into his arms because he, too, is described, like Joseph of Arimathea, as one who was looking for the kingdom.

And it was Simeon who said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen what I have spent my whole life looking for.

And he said that as he took the baby Jesus into his hands. And now you see this strange reference to Joseph of Arimathea at the point of Christ's death, saying of him that he, too, was looking for the kingdom.

Well, Joseph took action on seeing that Christ had died. And he went to Pontius Pilate and he told Pilate that he wanted the body of Jesus.

[ 9 : 45 ] And Pilate was surprised to find that Jesus was already dead. In one of the stories, you may know that they went to break his legs because apparently in execution by crucifixion, it's a long and lingering death, which might go on for days.

But they were on the eve of the Sabbath and the festival of the Passover. And it was offensive to the Jews to have dead bodies hanging around the city during the festival.

And so they wanted to complete it. And they went and broke the legs of the two thieves. When they came to Jesus, they saw that he was dead. And they drove a spear into Christ's side.

And the testimony in John's Gospel says there came out water and blood. The implication being that he was already dead.

And theologians, and I think it's a wonderful meditation for you to consider, that Christ died on the cross, but not because of the cross.

[11:04] In other words, he was not put to death. He died on the cross. He gave up his spirit to the Father. And that nobody took his life from him.

You can consider the implications of that, if you like, on the basis of that evidence that he was dead already when they drove the spear into his side.

But Pilate, who was used to a man lingering on the cross for many hours, if not days, was surprised that he was already dead. And Joseph of Arimathea assured him that in fact he was dead and asked for the body.

Now, remember that there had been an insurrection. Three men had been arrested and thrown into prison. Jesus had been arrested and accused of claiming to be the king of the Jews, and he'd been thrown into prison.

One man had been released, which was Barabbas. Three men had been put to death on the cross. And to go and ask for the body of Jesus, I think, would take a certain amount of something.

[12:16] I don't know what you'd call it. But the disciples were all hiding for fear of the Jews. Only the women were hanging around because they weren't afraid of the Jews.

I think there's more to it than that, but they were there. And this man used his very considerable dignity and prestige and his place in society to go and ask for the body of Jesus.

And having done that, it says that he went and took him down from the cross. There's a very interesting sidelight to this story, and that is that assisting him at this time was Nicodemus from John chapter 3, the ruler of the Jews who came to Jesus by night and said, Teacher, we know that you are a teacher come from God.

And what must I do to have eternal life? And Christ said to him, You must be born again. How can I be born when I am old? Can I enter a second time into my mother's womb?

Except you were born of water and the Spirit, you will never enter the kingdom. And so the conversation goes on, and then it fades out, and Jesus goes on to give some teaching, and you never hear again of Nicodemus until you come to the end of the Gospel of John.

[13:49] And there he is, these two leading aristocratic citizens taking the body of Jesus and putting it in a tomb, which Joseph of Arimathea had prepared for himself, and he was involved in doing that.

Nicodemus, we're told, brought some spices and just put them in with the body. They were working against the time because the Sabbath, the day begins, as you know, at sundown.

The mark of sundown is the first star of the evening and the people of Jesus and so they were working against this time to deal with the body of Jesus. The women were watching them and they took and put the body in this new cut, rock tomb.

And it says that never had been a body there before because, as you may know, tombs in that part of the world have been there so long that they've had several generations of the dead put in the same tomb.

But this was a new tomb that Jesus was put in. Well, you get that picture of these two men, probably assisted by others, but taking the body of Jesus down so that, in a sense, the same man who was looking for the kingdom, Simeon, at the beginning of Luke's gospel, took the baby Jesus into his hands.

[15:32] And the other man who was looking for the kingdom took the body of Jesus into his hands and placed it in a tomb. Well, let me just show you what happened subsequent to that.

Because it was the day of preparation and the first light, the first star was about to show. And they had to rush things through. The women came and watched what happened, the women from Galilee.

They watched where his body was laid and they went and prepared spices and ointments. And on the Sabbath day, they rested according to the commandment.

I mean, there's a powerful, powerful statement, you see. Because the great work of God's creation in seven days in the book of Genesis ends with, and on the seventh day, he rested from all his labors.

And here you have the great work. I would say, and I think that you need to try and understand this, that the greater work, there's the great work of creation, the greater work of redemption is completed.

[16:54] It's finished. And Christ rested on the seventh day in the tomb. That work was done.

It was accomplished by his death on the cross. Both ending, you see, with God resting on the seventh day.

I mean, it's a very powerful picture if you think about it. And the women waiting for the first day of the week in order that they might go and embalm his body.

They were not anticipating the resurrection. They were anticipating that this was the end, that it was over, that it was finished. The love which they bore to him would find its final expression when they embalmed his body and sealed the tomb.

And that was the end. Well, let me go back and look at this man, Joseph of Arimathea, a little more. Three references to him in the three Gospels.

[18:01] In Luke, he is a counselor, he is a good man, and a just man. And that, in the ancient world, was the ideal citizen in the Greek civilization, the good and just man.

If you turn to the Gospel according to St. Mark, he was an honorable man, the good citizen, so that he fulfilled the Greek ideal of what a man should be, he fulfilled the Roman ideal of what a man should be, and the other, the Matthew's Gospel says that he was a rich man.

So, if you're neither a Greek nor a Roman, he fulfills your ideal of what a man should be, rich. And, and that is powerful by reason of the wealth which he had.

So, he is really quite an unusual person. And, you see, we're used to, in the New Testament, beggars, prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, blind, deaf.

Here was a man of tremendous stature. And you know that, you probably know that I serve in a parish in Shaughnessy, and it's full of men of great dignity and great honor.

[19:32] Heavy, most of them, with the honors that they have acquired through a life of service in their, to their country and to their city and to their province and to the university.

they are just heavy with the honors that they've acquired. And, the prospect of going to them and saying, you are a sinner that needs to be saved leaves me somewhat deficient.

I don't know how to do it. I, uh, the, uh, the picture that my friend gave me a long time ago, he said, it's like driving up in a broken down Volkswagen bug to somebody who's going by in a Cadillac and saying, I got something you haven't got.

And, uh, it's a, a very difficult thing to do. And, uh, because it's not altogether obvious.

And, of course, it raises the enormous problem that what do we do with the good man? The man who is wealthy, the man who is recognized, the man who is intelligent, the man who is given leadership, the man who is given a life of service to the community.

[20:52] He's done everything. Well, does he need to believe in Jesus Christ? Well, the assumption is, as I run into it, no, he doesn't. He has accomplished by his own effort what others accomplished by dependence on somebody else.

And, uh, that creates, uh, an enormous sort of test, I think. But there's something strange about this presentation by Luke of this good man.

You know, not a leper, not a tax collector, a good, good man. And something about the extraordinary bravery of this man, and the fact that he could take his prestige, and his dignity, and his prominence in society, the fact that he had access to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, the fact that he could boldly go in and claim the body of Christ, that that is what a good man is.

A man who has that kind of clout and exercises that kind of courage and doesn't have any shame in doing it. So, you see that this is a good man that you have here, an ideal by Roman standards, by Greek standards, by any other standards.

And he goes. But I think these are the tests that belong to any man, no matter what prominence he enjoys, no matter how heavy the honors are that have been done to him.

[22:27] I still think he needs to be confronted by the person of Jesus Christ. He needs to be asked that question, who do you say that this man Jesus Christ is?

You have to answer that question. You cannot live your life and avoid that question. He's not to be one of the fearful and hiding disciples.

He is to be a man who confronts the person of Jesus Christ. Now, he obviously was in some measure a hidden believer.

He must have been. Nobody knew about him anywhere before in the New Testament. Nobody heard of him again. And I don't know how many hidden believers there are in our city, but I'm sure there are many.

And the thing is, I think, that when they are confronted with the person of Jesus Christ, then you find out who they are, no matter what dignity or office or prestige they hold, how do they respond to the New Testament record to the person of Jesus Christ.

[ 23 : 39 ] I'm not going to ask you what church they belong to. I'm not going to even ask you what good causes they subscribe to. All I want to know is how you respond to the apostolic witness to the person of Jesus Christ.

Christ. And I think that's important. I don't think you can go through life without it. The second thing that I want you to recognize about this man is this business that he was looking for the kingdom. And immersed as he was in the reality of his world, he nevertheless knew of another reality. and that was the reality that he was looking for. And he was trained to be aware of that other reality by the reading of scripture. And as he read the scripture he became conscious of another reality. Now I am happy to tell you that we have a little place which we go to on the weekends on Main Island in the Gulf Islands. We live in a nice house in Vancouver, but we get away from it whenever we can to another reality, which is the house on Main Island.

[ 24 : 56 ] Now I think that's the basis of the whole tourist industry. That there is another reality where you can get to for only \$6.95 complete.

Hotel, car, everything. There it is. So what they're doing is taking advantage of the fact that you suspect that there must be another reality.

And you're prepared to pay \$695 to get to it for two weeks in February. Well, the thing that's going to kill the tourist industry is sooner or later you're going to find that that ain't the place you're looking for.

There's still a greater reality. And that greater reality has to do with the kingdom of God. That's the longing that is deepest in all of our hearts, whether we recognize it or not.

It's the longing for that greater reality. And living in this present reality, looking for that other reality. The only way you can cope adequately with this present reality is the awareness of another reality, and that awareness is of the kingdom of God.

[ 26 : 09 ] And that's what this man was able to do. in the midst of all that he experienced, of prominence, of wealth, of prestige, of standing in the community.

He was not foolish. He had gone and got himself a tomb cut out of stone, because he knew what was the ultimate end of this earthly life.

He had prepared for that, but he was looking for the kingdom. And I don't think that there is any greater dignity could be conferred on you than to be one who looks for the kingdom, and that that is the great reality.

And you see, the great problem for wealthy, prominent, successful, prestigious people is the sense that there is no other reality, but who I am and where I am right now.

And that is the tragedy of their lives. The tragedy that I think is terribly difficult for them. And they haven't understood in a sense the first principle of the kingdom, which says blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom.

[ 27 : 31 ] And it's not saying that you haven't got the bucks in your pocket. It doesn't say that you haven't got the best address in the city. It doesn't say that you're not the chief executive officer of the largest corporation in the city.

All it says that unless you know the reality of your poverty over against the reality of the kingdom, then there is no blessing that belongs to you. It just isn't yours.

And that, I think, is why, woven into this story of the crucifixion, this central event in all of history, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, is this picture of a good man.

A good man who was looking for the kingdom and was not ashamed of Jesus Christ. Those two things.

And that those two things should mark our lives. Let me just pray. Father, we remember that the Lord Jesus did say, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[ 28 : 57 ] And we ask that as we rehearse the events of Christ's death and resurrection, salvation, through the remainder of this holy week, we ask that we might be made very much aware of the terrible poverty of our own circumstances and the circumstances of our world, and the wonderful and abundant riches that belongs to us in the inheritance of eternal life, life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ.

Help us not to be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ in our world. We ask in his name.

Amen. Amen.