

Joseph of Arimathea - the Lord's Undertaker

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now and to our reading for this morning. You'll find that in Mark's Gospel at chapter 15. Mark's Gospel, chapter 15, and if you have one of our church Bibles, you'll find that on page 852.

And we're going to read from verse 33 to the end of the chapter. Mark's Gospel, chapter 15, at verse 33. And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, Behold, he is calling Elijah. And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

[1 : 24] And when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, Truly, this man was the Son of God.

There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, the younger, and of Joseph and Salome.

When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him. And there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem. And when evening had come, since it was the day of preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, he took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already 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.

And Joseph brought a linen shroud and, taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

[2 : 50] And Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Joseph, saw where he was laid. Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word.

Amen. Well, my dear friends, please turn to Mark chapter 15.

I say my friends because I seem to get more and more friends each time I come up, and it's a great joy to me. So, please turn with me today to Mark chapter 15, verse 22.

And I'd very much like you to follow me this morning, if you're able, and have a Bible close at hand. And while you're turning, just nudge your friend if they're in the Old Testament.

Went with the New Testament, Mark chapter 15. So, while you're doing that, let me say something about last week. I feel now that I'm no longer a visitor. I feel I'm part of the home team.

[4 : 01] And I feel that the servants of the word was as good as ever. Richard Pratt stretched us and taught us a very great deal.

I'm not sure that I've been able to take it all in yet. Thank you for the massive hard work that many of you did to make that possible. You did us proud. And incidentally, the accommodation here is wonderfully spacious.

You have these lovely large rooms, which are perfect for conferences like this. And I can't wait to see the changes that are coming from the new building work.

I feel I must come for your Christmas service. No, no, it's no good like talking like that. Builders are always late, aren't they? Let's say, I'll come to a service in January and hope that they're finished. Well, no more of all that. Let's turn to Mark 15. Am I booming? Richard Pratt once or twice boomed in that part of the world. I think it may have been the speaker. If I'm booming, put up your hand and I will stop booming.

[5 : 04] Now, you may have discovered by now that I love Bible characters. I think I took Nerman with you last year when I was here.

And this morning, we're going to look at a man who bursts on the scene unexpectedly and then disappears and we hear no more about him. His name, you will have already guessed, is Joseph of Arimathea.

Well, the account is amazingly short and to the point, little over a hundred words here in Mark 15. And yet, Joseph was an indispensable servant of God's purposes.

There was a huge work to be done, and I want to explain to you what that work was this morning in its fullness. A huge work to be done, and he was the only person capable of doing it.

And that work was the burial of the Lord Jesus Christ. Burial, of course, means something slightly different for us. We inter people below the ground. A burial then, as you well know, meant a tomb above the ground, and we shall come to that in a moment.

[6 : 16] Now, it's very easy, I think, to miss the importance of this. If I were to ask, and if I were to ask you, what is the essential message of Christianity? You would say, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

If you were to ask the early apostles, and if you were to look at the great Christian creeds, you would find there were not two things that they say, but three. Namely, the death of Christ, his burial, and his resurrection.

Next time you look at one of the great creeds of the Christian church, you will notice it. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, dead and was buried, and then on the third day he rose again. It's an essential part of the story, and it might not have happened.

It would happen, of course, in the purposes of God through this man. So here is Paul giving you what is possibly the very earliest Christian creed from 1 Corinthians 15.

What I received, I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he was raised.

[7 : 28] And the man who saw to this burial is Joseph, a classic case of the right man at the right place in the right time. And, of course, time was of the essence.

You don't need to be a mathematical scholar to work out that if the Lord Jesus Christ died at about 3 p.m. in the afternoon, and if the Sabbath began at 6 p.m. as the evening closed in, we have just three hours, that is 180 minutes, in which Joseph has to do this work.

And that must include a visit to Pilate, as we're going to see, which I guess must have taken about an hour. That leaves another two hours to do all the rest.

Well, now I'm going to read Mark's account again. I spent a delightful few hours yesterday putting all the accounts together, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

And I shall refer to all of them, though we won't have time to turn to them, but we'll make Mark our basic study. The burial of Jesus, Mark 15, verse 42.

[8 : 38] It was preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath. So as evening approached, that's an ominous point, you see, the evening is approaching, there's no time to be lost.

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Jesus.

So Joseph brought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, placed it in a tomb cut out of the rock, then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb, and don't forget this last sentence, it's very important.

And Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, saw where he was laid. Now before we plunge into this little story, just imagine what would have happened without Joseph.

[9 : 54] I'm making this up, of course, we don't know, nobody's told us, but it's fairly obvious. If it was a dead body there on the cross, the dead body of the Lord as it indeed was, the Romans would

have left it there.

They didn't care two hoots. But the Jews did care. To leave a dead body like this was to pollute the land. Therefore, what would they have done left to themselves?

Again, we're not told. I think there's only one possible guess that makes any sense. They would have taken this body that they hated, that was despised, that they wanted to show every possible degradation to, they would have taken it and thrown into the Valley of Hinnom, where all the rubbish of the city burned every day.

I don't think they would have put it in a pauper's burial place, because that would have been to pollute the others. I think they would have thrown the body away as fast as they could get rid of it, so that no one would make it an object of pilgrimage, worship, or whatever.

Well, whatever they might have done, Almighty God has other plans, which will become clear. And since our God knows the future, I think of this also before we start, if God knows the future, he would know that lies about Jesus would be spread in the centuries to come.

[11:12] For example, the lie that he never really died but swooned in the tomb, that lie was still being passed around when I was a student at university. So God would know that.

Almighty God would know that another lie, which Jews have constantly believed, is that the body was stolen, never really secured the tomb. And another, though I don't think so popular, though you still occasionally hear it, is that the women went to the wrong tomb.

Now, Almighty God must have known that those lies would carry on. Lies have a long life, don't they? They go on and on and on. They go on repeated by stupid people who never thought for themselves, and never investigated, but they are very powerful.

And if these lies are to be removed from any credibility, then something has got to be done. And what was done was the visit of Joseph. Now I'm going to put together the unique qualities of this man.

I'm going to count them up. I'm actually going to count four only. I could have counted about eight or nine. But I put together about four from the four Gospels.

[12:21] These are the marks of a man that God could use, and did use, at this crucial time, when in three hours, the body of Jesus has to be laid in a tomb with extraordinary consequences that I'll come to at the end.

One. No surprise, he was a disciple of the Lord Jesus. Despite being a member of the Jewish Council, by the way, all the four I'm going to mention, I think, are rather rare.

I don't think they're common things. It would be a rare matter for someone to be a disciple of Jesus and a member of the Jewish Council. John tells us, in his Gospel, that he was a secret disciple.

So, as a secret disciple, he would do nothing about it. But there is no time for secrecy now. John, Joseph comes out into the open.

It is a risky business, I think, don't you, with the crowds around, the atmosphere at the time. A risky business for a man of this standing to show any concern for the hated Lord Jesus.

[13:35] And remember, the cause is lost. Jesus is dead. There's no hope amongst people for the future. And at this very moment, he comes out into the open, no longer a secret disciple.

There is, I think, great courage here. I think you only tell, really, whether anybody's going to achieve anything for Christ in foul weather, not fair weather.

Are you the kind of disciple that's willing in foul weather in difficult times when everything is against you and it's a risk to show your head above the parapet?

Are you that kind of disciple where Joseph was? And remember that he's still a Jew, so he knows that the burial has got to be done in full accord with Jewish customs.

That's another very intriguing point. And John makes a point of mentioning it in his description. So here is a secret disciple. He's a Jew, but now on the side of Christ, he comes out into the open to do what has to be done and to be done in the proper way.

[14:41] A disciple of Christ who's no longer hiding. Secondly, he's a member of the Jewish council and therefore prominent in Jewish life.

Luke tells us this. He says he was a member of that council that ordered Jesus to be crucified, but he had not consented to their deed and action, and otherwise, he was uncompromised.

God does not use secret disciples. Get that straight. I'm sure you know that. You've got to come out into the open. And God does not use someone in church or state who is compromised with evil.

We've got to come clean. Whatever our associations are with a wicked state or a faithless church, we've got to be uncompromised.

And Joseph was. Three, he was a man of remarkable standing as far as I can see in the general society of the day.

[15:51] Look what Mark tells us. He went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Now, I wonder how he did that if he wasn't a very prominent person in society at the same time.

I can imagine when he arrives at Pilate's house, the PA or whoever it is comes in. I'm very sorry. There's no way in the world in which Pilate is going to see anybody today.

He is very upset. He had a very stressful morning. His wife is also very stressed as well. I know that from I've seen them. And he is not willing to see anybody.

I'm so sorry you can't see him. So Mark says, well, will you show him my card? Or something of that sort.

So I'm sorry. It's no good you're asking for me to show your card. I'm sure he won't see it. Well, please do so. And he does so because of the standing of this man in society. So he went bolder to Pilate and Pilate was willing to see him and he asked for the body of Jesus.

[16:59] Now notice what happens here which once and for all shows that Christ was really dead. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead.

Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. You see the detail there? He can't believe that he's died because the other two criminals are alive.

He makes investigation and finds that he is indeed dead. God does not use secret disciples. He does not use people who are compromised in state or church.

and he only uses people who are bold and willing to take the opportunities they have. We all have different opportunities. We are not all able to knock at the front door of governor generals and get an entrance but Joseph was and he did.

Fourth and this again is rare. Joseph was a rich man. that's comparatively rare in every day and every generation.

[18:14] Otherwise, I take it, it would have been impossible to get the body down from the cross and to bury it in a tomb. He would need servants to get the body down from the cross.

Now, I wonder if you remember, in fact, I'm sure most of you can remember, the very famous pictures, oil paintings, of what is called the deposition, forgetting of the body of Christ down from the cross.

They are all imaginary. None of them is true. Either there is a picture of weeping women and distraught men gathered around the cross, the body, Jesus coming down, or, and if you remember, I think it's Hieronymus Bosch's picture which Peter Hitchens puts as the cover of his book a group of people who hated Jesus gathered around the cross.

As far as I know, by the way, I don't like those religious pictures in the national galleries. It always made up of people with rather lanky faces and halos around their heads and it's all so unreal, isn't it?

But I do believe that the painters who painted this scene wanted to be real and yet what they said was entirely unlikely and imaginary. The only people who would have been there at the basics of the cross would be the soldiers.

[19:39] The only person giving orders would be the centurion. He's the man of influence and Joseph comes to him and has the ability and the influence to say, please, I want you to move the soldiers out of the way.

I'm in charge. Here's a chance for any young artist. Are there any young artists here with great promise? Here's a chance for you to paint a real picture of the real thing, which is Joseph with his servants with the very difficult business of taking Christ from the cross.

The nails have to be undone, the cords, the crowd has to be moved out of the way, the soldiers have to be asked to leave, and time is short. Not only have his servants got to take Jesus down from the cross, the time is short, he's got to find somewhere a tomb in which to bury him, and we're told in Matthew, now listen to this, there's a tomb in the same garden nearby, which belonged to Joseph, which he had cut out for himself.

Isn't that striking? He'd actually made it for himself and for his own family. It was near at hand in the providence of God, the evening is drawing on, this fact is literally a godsend, and he gives what he

has made willingly.

And there's a fascinating touch in Matthew, we're told that nobody had as yet laid in that tomb. Do you remember the donkey that Jesus ordered on the great entry into Jerusalem?

[21 : 20] Do you remember that Jesus said, I want you to get this donkey on which no one has ridden, and now a tomb is prepared into which nobody had ever been lain? God used a man who made no secret of his commitment to the despised Lord Jesus, as an example, who had influence that was rare amongst the people, who had means and was able to do what probably nobody else could do, and when he takes a lead, will you notice what happens?

According to John, and I'm sure you remember the point, another person comes out into the open from the council, Nicodemus. It's made absolutely plain that Joseph is the leader and Nicodemus is the follower, but this happens in life still, doesn't it?

It happens in youth work. Very often what it needs is one young person to come out into the open at school or college. And then other young people will come out too.

And I think it happens in church affairs. We in the Church of England are facing in the next 12 months the same problems that you have faced.

We have learned a great deal from what has happened to you. Many of the same things are going to happen to us. It would be of immense importance for us if just one of our major church leaders would come out into the open and say no, no further.

[22 : 56] Just one. You only need one leader. At the moment, everyone is silent. No one will do it. We have two Christian archbishops and we have many bishops who know perfectly well what the gospel is and what the moral standards of the New Testament are.

But as yet not one has boldly said no, not a step further. Rather back to the truth. Will you pray for that?

It would be tremendous. I tell you what, if one man did it, others would follow. That's human nature. We wait for a lead. Joseph broke ranks and took his stand and Nicodemus comes with him.

Joseph and his men roll the great stone across the tomb and the tomb is secure and no one can steal the body. I love the touch at the end.

He went away. The job is done. Plenty to ponder, I guess. He must have wondered what he was going to do in the future. People would want to know about that body, but never mind. We're not told.

[24 : 04] He went away, having done his job. And all three synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke report that the brave women who had been watching saw where the tomb was.

No possibility of going to the wrong tomb. And now let me tell you as I finish the wonderful consequences of this work of Joseph of Arimathea.

God has set the stage for a hugely important happening. When the women arrive at the tomb and the stone is rolled away, they find that the tomb is empty.

There are the grave clothes lying as though the body has passed through it and there is no Jesus there. This means that the resurrection of our Savior was a grave emptying resurrection.

That is that he rose not in the old body but in a new glorified body. That is in a body that is fit for the new heavens and the new earth.

[25 : 09] That is a body that anticipates the future. That is a body that we shall all ourselves one day have if we believe in Christ. Now that I sit in a pew very often, I don't like those sermons which have 175 cross references, do you?

So I decided this morning I'd have a new one. But it's one that you've got to turn to therefore, is there any one? I want you, if you will, to turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

I don't know the page, but I tell our congregation at home that they ought to know the page anyhow.

1 Corinthians, and I'll tell you what this body was like. You'll have heard these words before, but I think they ring with new splendor as we think of that empty tomb.

Verse 42 of 1 Corinthians 15. You ready for it? This is what you're going to be like one day if you believe in the Lord Jesus. And this is what Christ was like that morning. No longer the body beaten and bloody and stained with suffering.

Verse 42, so will it be with the resurrection of the dead, that is the dead believers. The body that is sown is perishable. It is raised imperishable.

[26 : 30] It is sown in dishonor. It is raised in glory. What they saw was a glorified Christ. It is sown in weakness. Was it not sown in weakness that day of the crucifixion?

It is raised in power. Was it not so on the Easter morning? It is sown a natural body. It is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

So it is written, isn't a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first but the natural and after that the spiritual.

The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth, and as is the man from heaven, so are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, and we all know how earthly we are, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.

Isn't that a marvelous sentence? We shall bear the likeness of the man who stepped forward, seen only of course by the angels in the first case as he stepped forward on the Easter morning.

[27 : 38] Some years ago, Bishop David Jenkins betrayed his trust by saying that Jesus rose only spiritually from the cross, but that his bones are lying still in Palestine.

I recall that I was sitting in a group discussing this betrayal of the faith and incidentally of his position as a church leader. We had a very insightful leader of the group, and I shall not forget him saying to our group these words.

We were discussing the fact that David Jenkins had denied the resurrection, and our leader said this, no, he's betrayed far more than that.

He's not only denied the resurrection, he's denied the new creation. The empty tomb is the promise of the future.

Just before I caught the train to come up to Glasgow, I looked in my pigeonhole, and there was a letter from a student asking why we worship on Sunday and not the Sabbath. So it's the first job I have to do when I get home.

[28 : 46] And I think I shall use this story partly in my answer. Because the Sabbath commemorates the old creation that will be over, whereas the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, Monday's not the first day of the week, it's Sunday, the first day of the week, celebrates the new creation.

What a hugely important work had to be done late that afternoon. Three hours only to do it as the evening drew in.

At least on our visiting pilot. Only one person able to do it, and he did it. Is there anything here for us? Well, of course, you don't have work and I don't have work of that unique magnitude.

But perhaps there is a tiny word for all of us who believe. There are countless jobs that have to be done in God's name and in God's kingdom every day, every week, every month, every year.

And it is often the case that you or I are the only person who can actually do that little job. A friend to comfort. A visit to make.

[29 : 55] A prayer responsibility to undertake. A meal to share. A word to speak. An invitation to give. A gift to send. When Jesus went as far as saying that giving a cup of cold water in his name will get a reward, the mind boggles at the rewards for those who take the opportunities they are given and use the gifts they are given to do what needs to be done.

But finally, back to Mark 15. It is of great interest to me and it was, I think, for the first time that I noticed it yesterday. At the end of each time, a story is told in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

We're told that the women were watching. They did a job which only they could do. No, no, no. It wasn't to anoint the body with spices.

That's what they intended to do. That was not the job that God in his providence had given them.

There was no need to take the spices because the body wasn't there. But Almighty God had given them a job that only they could do, which was to witness and to announce the world of the glorious resurrection.

The women found it an awesome thing, a frightening thing, an amazing thing. It was ultimately a glorious experience. And we honor them for it today.

[31 : 19] Joseph was the only man who could see that the Lord was buried. This small group of women were the only group who could tell the world of Christ's victory.

Let's pray.

Let's pray.