

“LOW IN THE GRAVE HE LAY”

John 19:38-42

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INTRODUCTION

This is the “dark period” of Christianity—the period between the death and resurrection of our Lord when His body lay lifeless in the tomb.

- It appeared as though Satan had won.
- Jesus’ enemies were ecstatic—yet wary!
- Jesus’ disciples were discouraged and defeated. Their hopes were dashed.
- Most of them had scattered to their homes and places of hiding.
- Jesus’ death was “atoning” and “propitiatory”, but most did not yet understand that truth.
- Jesus lay “**low in the grave**”.

However, there are some bright spots here. Although Jesus’ adversaries were making every attempt to fully accomplish their hateful plans against Jesus (19:31-38), there were some other “secret” disciples who used this opportunity to come out into the open in order to declare their love and loyalty for our Lord.

Often in life loved ones wait until it is too late to express their feelings of love and appreciation; when their relative has died they get up at the funeral and wax eloquent about how wonderful they were and how much they loved them. Many would love to hear such words while they are alive!

In this case, Joseph and Nicodemus had been “silent” disciples of Christ during His earthly ministry; now, in this time of crisis they openly declare their love and loyalty by their actions. There were some loyal ladies at the cross who had steadfastly remained faithful to the Lord (see Mt., Lk, and Mk.) But John was apparently the only one of the 12 there.

It is “better to be late than never”, **BUT IT IS BEST NEVER TO BE LATE BUT TO BE THERE ALWAYS FOR OUR LORD.**

Here we see the identities of the two secret disciples, and the actions of the two of them.

I. BEING A SECRET DISCIPLE (38-39)

A. Joseph of Arimathea (Likely Ramathaim-Zophim, 20 miles NW of Jerusalem)

He was likely now living in or near Jerusalem—since he had a tomb there.

What do we know about him?

- He was a disciple. (Mt. 27:57)
- He was in the state of being hidden—for some time.
- Mark and Luke tell us that he was “looking for the kingdom of God.” (Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:51)
- He was a good and righteous man (Lk. 23:50).
- He was a member of the Sanhedrin, a “councilor” (Mk. and Lk.)
- He had not consented to the Sanhedrin’s plan against Jesus (Lk. 23:51).

- He was a rich man (Mt. 27:57).
- He had “fear of the Jews” (John 19:38). He could have been dismissed from the Sanhedrin, or even from the Synagogue (cf. similar fear in 7:13; 20:19; and excommunication in Jn. 9:22).
- Though timid, in this case he “gathered up courage” (Mk. 15:43). His love for Jesus gave him courage.
- The fact that he had a tomb near to site of execution was likely his motivation.

B. Nicodemus (cf. Jn. 3:1-16—the discussion of the need for new birth, and also the prediction of Jesus’ being “lifted up”—crucified and exalted; 7:50-52—he stood for Justice in Jesus’ case before the council.

- John is the only Gospel to mention Nicodemus.
- He first came to Jesus (or “at the first or beginning” of Jesus’ ministry) at night.
- This shows that he also was a secret disciple.
- He also was a Sanhedrin member (3:1; 7:50-52).
- He and Joseph obviously were acquaintances.
- Joseph’s courage likely encouraged him. The similar ordering of words in vv. 38 and 39 shows the relationship of the two men.
- Jesus is already, by His being lifted up, “drawing men” to Himself—and prominent men at that!

These men confessed Jesus in the hour of His deepest degradation.

II. BEING A CARING DISCIPLE

A. The Request for His Body—that “he might take it away.”

- This meant taking it down from the cross and then taking it away for burial.
- Required courage to go before Pilate with such a request.
- Such a request would expose his loyalty to Jesus.
- Since Pilate had already granted to the Jewish leaders an expedited death for the three men so as to get them off the crosses before sunset, Pilate was glad to grant this request of Joseph.
- Joseph came and took away Jesus’ body—not likely by himself; he likely had the assistance of the Roman soldiers
- Greedy Roman governors were known to have sold for bribes burial privileges; but not here. He granted the body to Joseph (Mk. 15:45).
- **Proper burial** was a huge issue for Jewish culture. Joseph, by doing this, was showing his deep affection for the Lord. Compare the burial of John the Baptist by his disciples in Mt. 14:12, and the burial of Stephen by his believing friends (Acts 8:2).

B. The Preparations of the Body

1. Joseph furnished the “bandages”

- The word used here in John refers the linen strips by which they would wrap each individual limb and the torso itself—mummy style.
- Mt., Mk, and Lk. All refer to a large linen sheet purchased by Joseph—which would be used to wrap the body of Jesus.
- However, this practice was according to the “custom of the Jews”—not after the Egyptian method of embalming during which the body was mutilated by disemboweling and removing the brains and steeping the body with nitrates. Nor did the Jews follow the practice of cremation followed by the majority of other nations.
- “To bury” in v. 40 in the LXX of Gen. 50:2 refers to the embalming of Joseph by the Egyptians.

2. Nicodemus furnished the spices (39)

- These spices would be inserted into the folds of the wrappings.
- There was a “mixture” of myrrh and Aloes
- Myrrh was from the Balsamodendron tree of Arabia. The aromatic gum of this tree produced the odiferous spice.
- Aloes were from the large tree called Agallocha; a powder from this fragrant wood produced the spice.
- John says that he brought “100 pounds” weight—each “litra” weighed 12 ounces; there were about 72 pounds of spices—enough to cover Jesus’ entire body.
- This was a lavish amount and reminds us of Mary’s abundant precious ointment poured upon Jesus in 12:3 in order to “prepare Him for His burial.
- The amount indicates Nicodemus’ “lavish love” for our Lord.
- It also indicates that he was a man of wealth.
- The amount also shows that Jesus was considered worthy of “royal” honors—He was a king! For Psalm 45:8 is the only other passage to combine these two spices, and it refers to the spices connected with the “ivory palace” of King Solomon. Moreover, II Chr. 16:14 mentions that at king Asa’s burial the burial place was filled with spices. Another example was the 80 minas of spices given by Onkelos at Rabbi Gamaliel’s burial—since he regarded Gamaliel as better than a hundred kings.
- Jesus had spoken of his kingdom in 3:3. Nicodemus remembered Jesus’ words in 3:14-16 and appreciated that Jesus had died for him!
- Now he was ready to do what he could for Jesus.

Almost all of Jesus’ disciples who had openly followed Him had now run away; these two secret disciples came out in the open—**even though they had nothing personal to gain by doing so!**

C. The Placement of the Body (41-42)

1. The body was taken to a “garden” (41)

Compare the “Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was betrayed.

John is the only one to mention either garden.

2. In this garden was a “new” tomb.

- This does not necessarily mean that it had just been carved out of the rock (Mk.15:46); it does mean that it had never been used for burial. No one had not yet been laid there—double negative very emphatic.
- This tomb belonged to Joseph (Mt. 27:60); it was very expensive, yet he was willing to allow it to be used for Jesus.
- Compare Is. 53:9—He would be with the rich in His death!
- The tomb was near the place of execution. (42)
- The day of Preparation was drawing to a close, and the Sabbath drew on (42).
- Joseph rolled a very large rock in a groove in front of the entrance (Mt. 27:60).
- The entrance was very low—both Mary (20:11) and Peter (20:5; Lk. 24:12) had to stoop when entering.
- The body may well have been placed into a recessed declivity in the ground; but there were seat-like projections on each end where people could sit—cf. the angels later (20:12).
- There was no shaft here where the body would be put in endwise.
- After the burial, the Jews demanded and received a seal for the tomb, along with a guard of soldiers to prevent any tampering.
- This “seal” would include a cord covered with wax or clay and impressed with a seal.
- Certainly Jesus’ body could not be removed from this tomb!
- “He that sitteth in the Heavens shall laugh; He shall have them in derision.” (Ps. 2:4).

CONCLUSION

Jesus’ body did not decay (Acts 2:31); nor did His body even become defiled by coming into contact with any other decaying bodies!

Decay had never entered this tomb—nor would it ever do so!

Here, Jesus sanctified the grave for all of His followers.

This rich man’s tomb, fit for a King, was used for **the King**.

Such truths hint at His exaltation which would follow shortly.

Yes, Jesus was in this grave only temporarily—soon the grave would be able to hold him no longer and the chains of death would be broken. He would come forth triumphantly. We will see this fact next Sunday.