

Luke 23:50-56 Joseph and the Women Care for Jesus' Body

Most of us have probably not given much thought to what happens to a dead human body between the time of death and burial. We usually leave such details to the undertaker/funeral director/mortician. In the ancient world, family members usually took responsibility for dealing with a dead body. Normally, in the Jewish culture, a dead body would be buried quickly after death. And generally speaking, family members and close friends took care of these duties.

We know from the other Gospel accounts that Mary, Jesus' mother, and John the disciple were at the foot of the cross for at least part of the time that Jesus was being crucified. We also know that many of his followers and acquaintances were nearby. I assume that at least a few of the other disciples were somewhere in the vicinity at the time of Jesus' death.

So, it's a bit of a mystery why *someone not mentioned in the Gospels up to this point*, Joseph of Arimathea, steps forward to care for the body of Jesus. You would think that Mary or John or a family member or another disciple would have made the arrangements to take care of Jesus' body. But for some reason, a person unknown before this point in the Gospel record comes forward to deal with Jesus' body.

Why did Joseph take this responsibility? Did Mary ask him to do this? Did the other disciples ask him? Did Nicodemus ask him to get involved? Did he do it simply because no one else did? We simply don't know.

In any case, into the account comes a man named Joseph. He's a prominent man, a member of the Sanhedrin, and he takes charge of the situation. It could be that only a prominent man like Joseph had the credentials or the authority to gain permission from Pilate to attend to Jesus' body. It was also providential that he had a newly-made tomb nearby the site of the crucifixion. Ultimately, it was the sovereignty of God that put the right *man* at the right *place* and the right *time*.

Our passage tells us about Joseph and a group of women who cared for Jesus' body after the crucifixion. Joseph in particular shows us the importance of standing publicly for Christ in a hostile world.

I. Joseph .50-54

- A. .50-51 He was a counsellor/council member—i.e., a member of the Sanhedrin, but (vs. 51) he did not consent to the action of the council. He probably did *not* participate in the trials that Jesus underwent before the Sanhedrin.

- B. .50b He was “a good man, and a just.” To describe him as “good” and “just” means that he was a faithful, obedient Jewish man. He was keeping the law and leading an honorable lifestyle, unlike other members of the council.
- C. .51end He waited for the kingdom of God. Here’s another indication that Joseph was a godly, faithful man. He’s a man God would use in a very important way.
- D. .52 He requested the body of Jesus.

The fact that Joseph requested the body of Jesus shows us several things about Joseph.

1. Joseph is a follower of Jesus, a disciple. The Gospel of John mentions that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews (Jn 19:38).

The Jewish leaders had threatened to expel from the synagogues anyone who confessed faith in Jesus (Jn 9:22). If you were expelled from the synagogue, you were virtually cutoff from Jewish society. So it’s understandable why Joseph didn’t confess Christ openly. He’s fearful of what could happen.

2. Joseph had courage.
 - a) The Romans had just killed Jesus, and it might be dangerous for a follower of Jesus to ask Pilate for his body.
 - b) The Jewish leaders certainly would not have wanted anyone to show respect for Jesus’ body. Joseph no doubt risked experiencing scorn, opposition, and hostility from his fellow Jewish leaders.
 - c) And now that Jesus was dead, it certainly appeared that everything Jesus had claimed about himself was false. From a Jewish perspective, there is no way that the Messiah would die on a cross. His crucifixion seemed to prove that Jesus was not the Messiah. So Joseph and all the other disciples would have been justified in dropping their loyalty to Jesus.

- d) But Joseph now comes out of the shadows to make sure that Jesus' body is not desecrated. He doesn't want Jesus' body to be dishonored. One of the most dishonorable things in that culture was for a corpse to go unburied. Joseph believes that Jesus deserves a decent burial.

According to Roman law those condemned to death had lost the right to be buried.¹ Burial was a mark of honor and respect, and death by crucifixion was meant to dishonor and disrespect the victim. But in some cases, the Romans would allow family or friends to bury the victim.

- e) In any case, this is a rather bold move by Joseph. It shows some courage and commitment. He comes out of the shadows and demonstrates his commitment to Jesus.

App: Joseph did what he could do. It seems likely that only a man of Joseph's position/stature could have gained permission from Pilate to take Jesus' body. So he used his position to do something positive. When no one else stepped forward to do this job, he did it. He had the position, authority, and resources to do something that perhaps no one else could do. He was the right *person* in the right *place* at the right *time*.

The church needs people like Joseph, people who see that a job needs to be done, and they step forward to do it. Perhaps you have position, authority, or resources that you could use to serve God and to serve his people. Maybe you've been in the shadows until now. But the time comes when you have to step forward, show some courage, and do a job that needs to be done.

Also, Joseph and Nicodemus were secret disciples of Jesus. I wonder how many Christians are secret disciples. For whatever reason, they don't want to be known as Christians. That might be understandable in some places—e.g., N. Korea, China, some places in Africa, Iran. If your life were truly in danger, it might make sense to try to hide your Christian identity. It's not right, but it makes sense.

¹ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 11, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 1043.

Is your life in danger for being a Christian in the US? No, not yet. Maybe in the future it will be, but not right now. So you have no excuses for being a secret Christian. Your life is not in danger for being known publicly as a disciple of Jesus. We should be bold in our Christian testimony. Everyone who knows us should see evidences in our lives that we are Christians.

How do we show others that we are Christians? Jesus said that others would know that we are Christian by our love for one another. When we demonstrate Christian virtues in our daily lives, others notice. “Let your light so shine before men....”

We have opportunities from time to time to demonstrate our commitment to Christ. We need boldness and courage, especially when others are hostile or scornful. Will you step out boldly to demonstrate your commitment to Christ when it may be personally costly or risky?

I believe that in the coming years, it will be increasingly tempting to be a secret Christian. People will not want to risk their careers, their relationships, or their freedoms by their public commitment to Christ. They’ll have to make a choice—either adopt the value system of the world or stand up for biblical values. It’s going to come down to the culture or Christ, float downstream or swim upstream. Culture will force us to take a position either for or against a worldly, ungodly agenda. We should not be ashamed of our commitment to Christ nor should we be afraid that others know about it.

Illus.: I heard an old story about a professing Christian who got a job in a lumber camp that had the reputation of being very ungodly. A friend, hearing that the man had been hired, said to him, “If those lumberjacks ever find out you’re a Christian, you’re going to be in for a hard time!” The man responded, “I know, but I need the job!” The next morning, he left for camp.

A year later, he came home for a visit. While in town, he met his friend who asked, “Well, how did it go? Did they give you a hard time because you’re a Christian?”

“Oh no, not at all,” the man replied. “They didn’t give me a bit of trouble—they never even found out!” (“Our Daily Bread,” 11/83.)²

The man lived in close fellowship with other men for a year, and no one found out that the man was a Christian. What a shame. What a missed opportunity to stand for Christ and lead others to Christ.

How hard is it for others to find out that you are a Christian? Do your friends and co-workers have the slightest idea that you are a follower of Jesus? Would they ever guess that you are? Is your Christianity so hidden that no one knows about it?

The Bible commands us to let our light shine in a dark and corrupt world. Others should be able to see quickly and easily that we are Christians. If no one knows that you are a Christian, it may be that you are not. If you are trying to be a secret Christian, you should be ashamed of yourself. Jesus suffered public humiliation for you; you should not be ashamed of him.

3. Joseph had the opportunity to verify that Jesus was actually dead.
 - a) Critics of the resurrection claim that Jesus didn’t really die on the cross. They suggest that Jesus’ disciples saw him after the crucifixion because he didn’t really die.
 - b) Joseph, Nicodemus, the women, and no doubt several others were eye-witnesses that Jesus was physically dead. As they took him down from the cross, they had ample opportunity to handle his body and verify that he was dead. They put him in the tomb because they thought he was dead. Every bit of evidence revealed that Jesus was dead.

As an aside: What normally became of the bodies of those crucified?

² Steven J. Cole, “Lesson 112: Taking a Stand for Christ (Luke 23:50–56),” in *Luke*, Steven J. Cole Commentary Series (Dallas: Galaxie Software, 2017), Lk 23:50–56.

- a) Often, the dead bodies of the victims were simply left on the cross after death for birds and wild animals to consume. Eventually, the body would decompose and fall from the cross and the remains be spread around the area by scavengers. Not very pleasant to think about.
- b) If a dead body were intentionally removed from the cross, it would typically be burned in the garbage dump (e.g., at the Valley of Gehenna), thrown into a ditch or a river, or buried in a field. Such bodies were not usually treated with much honor or care.

Interesting historical note: In 1968, an archaeologist was excavating some tombs near Jerusalem and found skeletal remains of a man who had been crucified. They found a large nail still stuck the right heel bone. So there is good evidence showing that the Romans nailed people to the cross in crucifixion, just as the Gospels claim.

B. Joseph cared for Jesus' body. .53

1. .53 He took it down from the cross. The other Gospel accounts tell us that Nicodemus helped Joseph with this task. Probably some of the women helped with this, maybe even some of the soldiers.
2. He wrapped it in linen. Standard practice at this time was to prepare a body for burial by wrapping it in linen material. They would cut/rip the linen fabric into strips and then wrap the body while sprinkling in the aromatic herbs.
3. He laid it in his own tomb.
 - a) The tomb was not far from the place of crucifixion. Perhaps one of the reasons that Joseph came forward in the first place was that he had an empty, newly-made tomb available just a short distance from Calvary.
 - b) Normally, only family members would be placed in the family crypt/tomb. For a non-family member to be placed in a tomb like this was rather unusual. This act shows Joseph's commitment to Jesus.
 - c) This also fulfills prophecy.

Isaiah 53:9 *And they made His grave with the wicked—
But with the rich at His death, ...*

- d) .53 This tomb “hewn in stone,” i.e., carved out of the rock. Typically, only rich people could afford to hire workers to carve out a tomb in the stone. The tomb would likely have included several carved-out benches on which bodies would be laid out. The bodies would decompose over the course of a year or so, then someone would collect the bones and deposit them in a bone box (ossuary).
- e) And we are told that it’s a new tomb—no one had been laid there before. Remember that Jesus came into Jerusalem on a colt that no one had ever ridden (19:30), and now he’s placed in a tomb that no one had ever occupied. Both of those facts speak to Jesus’ uniqueness.
- f) BTW, the normal tradition for the treatment of dead bodies among the Jews was burial. Sometimes a body would be burned, but that was rather unusual. Normally, dead bodies were buried or entombed under the earth.

App: The Bible does not *command* that the dead bodies of believers be buried, but burial fits the biblical pattern better than other practices. The biblical expectation seems to be that Christians bury their dead.

I don’t believe that it’s immoral or sinful to cremate the dead, but I do believe that it’s more true to the biblical pattern that we bury our dead.

No matter what happens to the dead body of a Christian, we know that God is able to resurrect that body. It’s like a seed planted in the ground. What comes up out of the earth at the resurrection will not be precisely the same body, but it will be similar to it, yet in a glorified, perfect condition.

.54 When did all of this happen? Luke tells us that this day “was the preparation,” the day before “the Sabbath.” Scholars through the years have tried to pinpoint the day on which Jesus died. Some have suggested that Jesus died on a Wednesday or a Thursday. Remember that Jesus said he would be in the tomb for three days. If the resurrection happened on Sunday morning, then going back 72 hours puts you at Thursday morning at the latest.

However, Luke clearly states that Jesus died on the “preparation,” that is, the day before the Sabbath. In fact, he tells us that the Sabbath “drew on.” This word literally means “to dawn, to begin.” The Sabbath “dawned” on Friday night at sundown and extended until sundown on Saturday. So the crucifixion had to happen on Friday during the day, probably from around 9 am until about 3 pm. Jesus was on the cross for about six hours, and he died sometime around 3 pm. They had time to take Jesus’ body down from the cross, wrap it up, and deposit it in the tomb before the Sabbath started on Friday evening.

Also, the word “preparation” is the same word that Greek-speaking people still use today for Friday. So there really can be no doubt that Jesus died on a Friday. We call it “Good Friday” for a good reason.

How do we get three days between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning? The Jews counted days a bit differently than we do. If an event occurred at any point between one sundown and the next, then you could count that whole day for that event. That’s how we can get three days from Friday to Sunday. Jesus was in the tomb for parts of three days—Friday evening (just before the Sabbath), all day Saturday (sundown Friday to sundown Saturday), and part of Sunday (sundown Saturday until just before sunrise Sunday). It’s not three complete days as we would count it, but parts of three days. We would think of three days as 72 hours, but the Jews would count a whole day even if the event occupied only a part of a day.

Trans: Joseph was the right man at the right time with the right resources. He did what he could; he stepped forward boldly to care for a situation that he was providentially suited to handle. And perhaps God has providentially suited you to serve God and God’s people in a way that no one else could. I hope you will step forth boldly like Joseph did when you see an opportunity.

II. The women .55-56

- A. They came with him from Galilee. A number of women from Galilee followed Jesus and provided for his needs (cf. 8:2 mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and “many others who provided for him from their substance”).
- B. The “followed after,” i.e., they were there when Joseph took Jesus’ body from the cross. They followed the procession to the tomb.
- C. They saw the tomb and how Jesus’ body was laid out.

1. .55 The word for “beheld” (θεάομαι) means “to view attentively.” This is important because it implies that these women knew very well where the tomb was and how Jesus’ body was laid out in the tomb. It seems likely that these women had entered the tomb to see how everything was arranged.
 2. [Skeptics of the resurrection suggest that the women went to the wrong tomb on Sunday morning. They were confused about which tomb Jesus’ body had been laid in, and so they went to the wrong one. That’s why they found the tomb empty.
 3. Obviously, that is an absurd idea. These women knew what tomb Jesus was in; they observed the place of the tomb carefully. They knew they’d be coming back later with more spices and herbs to anoint Jesus’ body. Further, *several* women had seen where Joseph’s tomb was located. Maybe one or two women could be confused as to the location of the tomb, but not the whole group. If they were confused, they could always ask Joseph where the tomb was.]
- D. .56 They returned home and prepared spices and ointments to anoint Jesus’ body as soon as possible after the Sabbath.
1. The Jews did not embalm their dead, but they did wrap the corpse with fragrant spices to deal with the stench of decomposition.
 2. It seems that they did part of the job on that Friday evening before the Sabbath, but they must not have finished. John tells us that Nicodemus brought a large amount of spices with which to anoint Jesus body, but perhaps they were too close to the Sabbath to finish the job. So they planned to come back and finish after the Sabbath.
 3. On the Sabbath day, they rested. They didn’t go to the tomb or do anything to Jesus’ body during this time because of the Sabbath restrictions.

Both Joseph and the women demonstrated their care for Jesus, even after his death seemed to indicate that Jesus was a fraud or a failure. Joseph and the women were not ashamed of Jesus. All followers of Jesus should show loyalty to our Lord. We should not be secret disciples. We should stand boldly for Christ and the Gospel even when doing so is risky.

Don't let fear prevent you from demonstrating that you are an unashamed follower of Jesus. Don't let it be said of you, "He was a disciple of Jesus, but in secret, because he feared his friends and family. He feared ridicule and rejection. He feared missing out on all the fun he would have if others knew he was a Christian."

Don't let it be said of you, "I never knew he/she was a Christian. I would never have guessed." Our words, actions, and attitudes should convey very clearly and obviously that we are Christians. I trust that everyone around you knows that you are a follower of Jesus. He suffered pain and humiliation for us, and the least we can do is stand up boldly for him like Joseph did.

Joseph did what he could. He used his position, resources, and authority for the benefit a needy person. He was the right person in the right place at the right time. Likewise, God has put us where we are for a purpose. We should do what we can to serve God and God's people.

That's where we are going to leave the account for a while. Luke describes Jesus' resurrection beginning in chapter 24. But since we are rather close to Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday, I'll be taking a couple of weeks to speak more about the meaning of Jesus' death. Luke tells us that Jesus was crucified, but he doesn't say much about the meaning or purpose of Jesus' death. So we'll have two Sundays plus the service on Good Friday to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' death. Then on Resurrection Sunday morning, we'll see how Luke describes Jesus' resurrection.