

Dead and Buried: How to Walk with Jesus in the Dark

Introduction

The Text

⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. ⁵⁴ It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵ The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (Luke 23:50–56)

With Jesus in the Dark

A. I would say this is essentially a message about walking with Jesus in the dark.

1. You've got kids, or you were a kid once, you know the sort of primal reaction to darkness: it's scary, it's disorienting, it's hard to hold on. You want to run, hide, throw on the lights, get out of it, right.
 - a. I remember as a kid, I thought there was something under my bed, you know, so if I ever had to get out to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, when I'd come back into the room, I'd take this running start and leap up and crash into my covers and pull them up over my head. It's scary in the dark. We can't see. Our imagination gets us. We want to hide under cover until morning.

B. And there are times as followers of Jesus where God takes us through the dark—momentarily, but we're in the dark, nonetheless—and we don't see what he's doing. We don't get it.

1. It feels to us like, at best, he's absent, or at worst, he's dead. He's flatlined. He's not here at all.
 - a. Sometimes it's personal stuff—everything around you seems to be falling apart.
 - b. Sometimes it's just looking out at the world we live in. Certainly we all might be tempted to feel this way these days with the stuff we're seeing in the news, right? Afghanistan, Haiti, Delta variant, wildfires, hurricanes, and on and on.
 - i. Where's God? Where's Jesus? You watch the culture taking potshots at him. Your "Jesus is a fairytale." And sometimes we wonder.

(1) Maybe you're there right now. Well, if so, this text, and this sermon, is for you.

- C. We see here, with this guy named Joseph and these unnamed women, three things we can do when we're in this place—when we're with Jesus in the dark. We can: (1) Take a Stand; (2) Take a Step; and (3) Take a Number.

(1) Take a Stand

Who Is This Joseph?

- A. I get this idea of taking a stand from Joseph's story here in particular. But in order to really see this we first have to try to piece together just who this guy is.
1. We don't know much about this "Joseph . . . of Arimathea" (v. 50). He just kind of drops in from out of nowhere in the narrative here.
- B. Interestingly—though he's not spoken of before the burial of Jesus nor after really—even still, all four gospels do take pains to highlight him in particular in these closing moments of our Savior's life. And because we have four different recountings of this event here, we actually do come to find that we can gather a decent bit about him . . .
1. For one thing, as Luke mentions here, we know the guy was a Jew, and, even more than that, he was "a member of the council" (v. 50).
 - a. The "council" here is a reference to the Sanhedrin, the highest court in Israel.
 - b. This is the body of men responsible in many ways, if you recall, for the conviction and ultimate crucifixion of Jesus (22:66).
 - i. These were significant men—elders, priests, scribes, Pharisees, leaders in Israel. And Joseph is among them.
 2. But more than just among them, Mark, in his account, goes a tad further to emphasize the fact that he is "a respected member of the council" (Mark 15:43). So this is a noteworthy man. He gets a lot of respect even from the upper crust there in Jerusalem.
 3. And we're told that he doesn't just have a lot of respect, we're told that the man has a lot of money as well. So Matthew goes out his way to accent the fact that he was "a rich man" (Matt. 27:57). This little detail will come into play in a big way later.
 - a. So the guy's got authority, he's got respect, and he's got money.
 4. But then, what's more, we come to find here that he's also got character—he's a man of seeming integrity and uprightness. So Luke tells us here that he was "a good and righteous man" (Luke 23:50).

- a. And, attempting to flesh that even further, he offers two pieces of evidence in support of this:
 - i. First he highlights the fact that Joseph, though a respected member of the Sanhedrin, “had not consented to their decision and action [concerning Jesus]” (v. 51a).
 - ii. And then secondly, he sums it all up by saying that “he was looking for the kingdom of God” (v. 51b). He wasn’t interested in the kingdoms of men. He wanted God’s kingdom to come, however fuzzy his vision may have been of it at this point. He was looking for it.

(1) Like a kid at the window, waiting for dad to get home from work so he can play ball in the yard, so is Joseph here waiting and looking for his God to come in power.

(a) I wonder, could that describe you? What are you at the window looking for, longing for above all else? A spouse, a better job, a house in the bay, or the kingdom of God?

5. All of this is taken one step deeper down when in the other gospel accounts we actually learn that this Joseph was himself a follower of Jesus . . . a “disciple.” So both Matthew and John tell us (Matt. 27:57; John 19:38).

- a. Now, perhaps we’re given critical background as to why he’d not consent to the cries for Jesus’ crucifixion. Now, perhaps we see why he comes to Pilate asking to care for the dead body of our Lord. He was a disciple.

C. But, and here is where things get particularly interesting, John tells us that, though he may have been a disciple, he was such “secretly for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38).

1. On the one hand, he loved Jesus. But, on the other hand, he didn’t want to tell anyone about it. He was hiding this fact about himself. He was scared. Scared of what? My guess: that he would lose his place of prominence and power and respect and things. Aligning himself with Jesus would cost him dearly.

- a. So we read of a similar dynamic back in John 12:42-43: “⁴² [M]any even of the authorities believed in him [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”

Taking Courage

A. That’s where, it seems, Joseph was. The cost of coming out for Jesus seemed too steep. And then something changes. Mark 15:43 puts it this way: “Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.”

1. The Greek word there translated “took courage” means “to show boldness or resolution in the face of danger, opposition, or a problem . . . [to] dare [to do something]” (BDAG). He “took courage.”
- B. Here’s what you’ve got to understand, for Joseph now to approach Pilate asking for the body of Jesus with the intention of treating it with such respect and devotion, it would mark him off as a sympathizer, it would out him as a follower.
1. Remember, the Romans convicted Jesus on the charge of treason, the Jews on the charge of blasphemy. With this move, then, he would be making himself an enemy of both. For Joseph to set himself on the side of Jesus here was to put himself in the way of great peril.
 - a. Romans would often leave the bodies of crucified criminals up on the cross for days while vultures picked at them and things—as a way of warning future offenders.
 - b. Jews, on the basis of texts like [Deut. 21:22-23](#) would want to bury the body, and would often be granted such a right even by Rome, but they would take the bodies of criminals and throw them into common graves.
- C. They would in no way do what Joseph is about to do: honor this crucified man, give him more than just a proper burial, but a burial fit for a king.
1. He likely washed the body—which, remember, at this point would have just been a bloody, gut-wrenching mess, after all the lashing and the beating and things;
 2. and he “wrapped it in a linen shroud” (v. 53);
 3. and we’re even told in John’s gospel that Nicodemus, another secret disciple now going public, quickly comes in with whatever spices he had access to, “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight” ([John 19:39](#))—which one commentator says is “an amount normally reserved for a king” (BECNT), they fold that in with the linens;
 4. and then Joseph lays him in “his own new tomb” ([Matt. 27:60](#)), which, as Luke says, was “a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid” ([Luke 23:53](#)).
 - a. In other words, Joseph is coming out of hiding, he’s a secret disciple no longer . . . he’s taking a stand.
- D. Something’s changed. But how? Why? Let me share with you my best guess . . .
1. It seems to me Joseph was probably there when Jesus was being tried and condemned by the Sanhedrin. These are his boys. This is his job. Luke tells us here that he didn’t consent to the decision. But back in [Luke 22:70-71](#) we’re told that “all” of them did. Or as Mark puts it: “[T]hey all condemned him as deserving death” ([Mark 14:64](#)).
 - a. Conclusion on this: either (1) he called in sick because he was too scared, or (2) he didn’t speak up because he was too scared. But either way, it seems to me, he must have cowered and he caved.
 2. And then perhaps he saw where his cowardice led for Jesus there on that cross. Maybe he was standing around with the crowd and he heard his Rabbi cry out with blood in his throat: “Father, forgive them . . .” ([Luke 23:34](#)). And he was struck. And he was moved. And he

saw in Jesus such boldness, such courage, such compassion and kindness, even in the face of death. And he thought: “That’s it. I’m not hiding any longer!” So he takes a stand.

- a. Now, to be clear, I don’t think he knew where all this would go. I don’t think anyone was expecting Jesus to rise up on day three after the Sabbath.
- b. He just knew: “I’ve got to stand with Jesus. God’s kingdom is involved in this somehow, and I want to be a part of it. Whatever it costs me. I don’t care.”

Kingdom Come!

A. And here’s what I want you to see . . .

1. Though Joseph probably had no clue what was really going on. Everything probably seemed bleak and dark—I mean he’s holding the dead body of his Lord in his hands. It seems like God is dead, doesn’t it. Literally.
2. But, in it all, God is on the move—not just for the world, but for Joseph, in a deeply personal way.

B. So we come to find that as Joseph puts Jesus in his own grave, he’s unwittingly bringing about the fulfilment of prophecy—things God said he would do some seven centuries prior through the prophet Isaiah. You remember [Isa. 53](#). It’s about God’s Suffering Servant—the one who will come and die for the sins of the people, for their forgiveness, so that they could be brought back to God.

1. Well, there’s this little detail in [v. 9](#) of that chapter that lines up miraculously with what we see here in our text with Joseph. But let me read to you beginning back in [v. 4](#): “⁴Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? ⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth” ([Isa. 53:4–9](#)).

- a. Why does Matthew go out of his way to emphasize that Joseph was a rich man? Well it was to strike a line back to this prophecy. And it’s a fact that cannot be denied, for only a rich man would have been able to afford the kind of tomb here described.
 - i. Implication: just when the kingdom seems to have stalled out, truly it’s advancing. God’s kingdom is coming, not in spite of the cross, but through it.

C. And I say God was moving here not just in a general sense, but a personal one as well.

1. It just struck me, for Joseph, think about it: Jesus is literally in his own tomb. Jesus is literally taking Joseph's place, dying for his sin and guilt and shame. "I denied him. I was afraid to follow him openly. I turned my back on Jesus and yet still he opened his heart to me, he died for me. He's in my grave. That should be me, dead under the wrath of God. But he's in there. And I'm out here. What mercy!"
 - a. That's what's happening in a very tangible sense here. God is dead but he's not dead, if you know what I'm saying.
- D. So Joseph takes a stand for Jesus, by faith, in love for him, and he's not disappointed. God always comes through.

How About You?

- A. And I've just got to think this is very relevant for a lot of us here in the Bay Area.
 1. Jesus isn't all that popular around here, right? You come out as Christian and you lose some cultural credibility and social capital and maybe worse.
 - a. So, the temptation is to hide away, to be a secret disciple, if there could be such a thing. Maybe I can be a Christian and have the glory that comes from the world.
- B. But, like Joseph, there reaches a crisis point, where you've got to take a stand, regardless of the cost. I'm coming out, with my extended family, with my neighbor, with my coworkers, with whoever. I'm not going to be ashamed to be associated with such an amazing King!
 1. Oh sure, are there times where I don't get what God is doing, where I feel like I've got the dead body of Jesus in my arms, we're burying that hope that dream. We're putting Jesus in the tomb. Of course! But is he moving even now in the dark? Will he come through big time in the end? You better believe it!
 - a. So when you feel like Jesus has you in the dark, push all your chips in on him, he's got you.
- C. Of course, I thought in particular about those Christians in Afghanistan right now. We don't have any clear estimates as to how many there are—anywhere from one to twenty thousand. But we do know that all of them in grave danger, especially these days.
 1. You know Afghanistan has already been one of the most dangerous places to be a Christian, and the events of the last couple weeks have only made matters even worse.
 - a. Under the Taliban, Bibles and Christian literature are deemed illegal and possession of them can be punishable by death. And the remaining Christians there say that is precisely what they expect them to do—kill them, enslave their children, especially their girls, and so forth.
 - b. One article I read states: "Those who identify with Christ are in continual danger of losing their possessions, their families, and even their lives."

- c. Pastors of underground churches in the area say that the Taliban has already contacted them and said they know where they are and what they're doing . . . and they're coming for them.
- d. One Afghan Christian, who's already been imprisoned for his faith there writes: "Our hope is not in politics but in Jesus who is the King."
 - i. Sounds like Joseph of Arimathea, doesn't it? Looking for the kingdom of God, even while it seems like your holding the dead corpse of Christ in your hands. Hope is dashed. No sign of life. But Sunday is coming and our God is already on the move!

(2) Take a Step

Who Are These Women?

- A. We learn something of what to do in the dark from these women mentioned here as well.
- B. Now we know from the other gospels that some of the women involved here include:
 - 1. Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons, if you remember ([Luke 8:2](#));
 - 2. Mary the mother of James and Joseph;
 - 3. and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (the apostles James and John) whose name it would seem from the other accounts is Salome ([Matt. 27:56](#); [Mark 15:40](#); [16:1](#)).
 - a. And these faithful women want to honor Jesus by caring for his body, anointing it with spices and things, as a way of showing their devotion.
- C. Now, either they didn't know about the spices and things that Nicodemus folded in, or they needed to finish themselves what those men began in haste but couldn't complete, or perhaps they just wanted to express their own sense of appreciation for Jesus.
 - 1. Whatever the case, they see where Joseph had put the body, and they return to prepare spices and ointments, we're told, but because, as Luke says, "It was the day of Preparation"—that is the day to prepare for the Sabbath, which would run from Friday at sundown to Saturday at the same, where all ordinary work was to stop—they didn't have time to get the job done on Friday. They'd have to wait until Sunday.

Radical Obedience

- A. And it's this last line of [Luke 23](#) that really struck me here: "On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (v. 56).
- B. That tells us what kind of women we have here. And it tells us the sort of thing we can do in our dark moments as well. Here's what I mean . . .
 - 1. Even when they didn't understand how God was working they were still committed to following his commands. That's big.

- a. You've got to put yourself in their place. How inconvenient would the Sabbath be at this point. Stopping to observe this seems crazy at this point. Our hope is dead, the one we'd been following as the Christ is no more. Certainly we're marked out as his followers as well, are we in danger next? We're not going to wait around to see what happens. Let's honor his memory sure, but let's get it done tonight and get out of here before something worse goes down.

- C. But you see they're doing more than just honoring Jesus' memory here. It would seem, like Joseph they're still looking for the kingdom, they're still thinking it could come. At this point, they don't know how, but maybe Jesus is a part of that.
 - 1. So they're not running. And they're not going to disobey the commands of their God just because they don't always understand why they have to and what he's up to. They trust him. They obey him. So "[o]n the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (v. 56).

- D. And let me just press this point a bit more here. We know that even though these ladies are willing to obey in faith and hope, they have no idea what's happening. The cross would have seemed to them, as to Joseph, a catastrophe. How can I say that? Well . . .
 - 1. For one thing, Salome, if she is the mother of James and John as is supposed—you remember, she had earlier asked Jesus if her boys could sit at his right and left hands in his kingdom. And Jesus just says: "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" (Matt. 20:22). "I'm not going to a throne. I'm going to the cross." The death of Jesus wasn't on her radar. She wasn't expecting some death and resurrection. She had no clue.
 - 2. Or take Mary Magdalene—you remember her in the garden outside of Jesus' empty tomb on Sunday morning. Even with the tomb empty before her, she still doesn't get what's going on. She's sitting out there weeping we're told in John 20:13, saying: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." The Romans did this or something. That's the idea. She has no clue on Friday what's coming on Sunday.

Sabbath Rest!

- A. But (and here's the point) even still, these women obey. Even when they don't understand God's ways they are ready and willing to obey his words. That's the thing to mark out.
 - 1. They rest according to the commandment. They take steps of obedience. They stop on the Sabbath. And as such they get front row seats to a magnificent display of God's glory in the gospel.

- B. As with Joseph, so too with them. Right when they would be prone to think God was dead, truly he's on the move. Right when they think things are going dark, truly light is breaking out.
 - 1. Just as Joseph was unwittingly fulfilling ancient prophesy of God's upcoming redemptive acts, so too these women were unwittingly stepping into God's fulfillment of the whole thrust and trajectory of this notion of Sabbath rest.

- a. In the very moments that these women are faithfully obeying this commandment, God is truly at work fulfilling the very heart of it for them in Christ.

- C. Sabbath rest in the OT was always pointing to what Jesus would accomplish for us on the cross. In Jesus, because of his death and consequent resurrection, now we have a deeper and more lasting rest than any of the saints before had ever known.
 - 1. When he says, “It is finished” on the cross, he means the work, trying to clean ourselves up, trying to justify ourselves, trying to pay back, make it right, trying to merit God’s favor, the burden of it all, it’s done. He’s taken care of it.
 - a. We can in the fullest and richest way possible now in him find rest. Jesus is my sabbath. As the author of Hebrews says: “[W]e who have believed enter that rest” (Heb. 4:3).

- D. And they’re just taking little steps of obedience. They have no idea what God is doing, how he’s working for their good. They’re just obeying. They’re in the dark, but light is dawning.
 - 1. And I love this, it’s like Luke is even hinting at this. When he says there in v. 54 that “the Sabbath was beginning” he makes a peculiar choice in the Greek, he chooses a word that actually means “dawning”—“the Sabbath was dawning.” And I say this is a very strange way of talking about it because, again, remember, the Sabbath begins in the evening. The sun is going down not up.
 - a. But don’t you see? Just as for Joseph God is dead but not dead. So too, for these ladies, the sun is going down but it’s coming up. Real rest, real joy. Morning light. That’s the idea.

How About You?

- A. And I just wonder, how about you?
 - 1. Can you follow God even when all seems lost? Can you obey God’s words even when you don’t fully understand his ways?

- B. For some of us it may be obeying God’s sexual ethic.
 - 1. We don’t get it. I want to sleep around. Or I want to sleep with people my same gender. The culture says it’s fine. But God says no. And you think he’s against you or he’s not here.
 - a. Can you obey him by faith, trusting he’s up to good even in the hard, even when you don’t immediately get what you want . . . knowing that he wants you to flourish more than you even do?!

- C. You know, maybe in the midst of this pandemic and things you’ve lost track of your spiritual life and disciplines and things.

1. It started off I can't come to church on Sundays or to Home Group because of this virus. But now you just don't want to. You know God commands you not to forsake assembling with the saints, but you don't feel it.
2. And you're not reading his Word in the morning and you're not praying. You know Paul says we should be praying always, but you're not even praying at all.
 - a. Can you step towards obedience by faith even when you don't feel it and trust the feeling will come, and God will be faithful?

D. That's how these women are preaching to us here . . .

(3) Take a Number

Joining a Long Line of Saints

- A. By "take a number" what I mean is: when we trust God and walk with him in the dark, by taking a stand and taking little steps of obedience, even when we don't get it, and we find him faithful, and he comes through, well we join a long line of saints that could share the same.
 1. In one sense your story will be profoundly unique. And yet, in another sense, it's quite similar. God's going to care for you. He's going to be good to you. He's going to get you through the dark. He's going to bring life from the death.
- B. And you know I'm coming to this here in particular because I don't know if you noticed but the language Luke uses to describe these folks here in our text, particularly Joseph, it's intentionally I think echoing the descriptions of people we met earlier in this gospel, people that made their appearance back at the very beginning.
 1. And as such, here at the end, we're being linked back to the beginning, to show God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And he's always faithful, even when we're confused and struggling. He always comes through for those who wait on him and trust in him.
- C. So Joseph we're told is "a good and righteous man" (Luke 23:50).
 1. Well this recalls the way that Zechariah and Elizabeth were described back in [Luke 1:6](#), where we read that "they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." And you remember their story. Luke goes right on in [v. 7](#) to say " ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years"—a shameful thing, especially in that culture. In other words, they were walking with God in the dark—taking a stand and taking steps of obedience.
 - a. And, you know what, God gave them a child, a miracle, John the Baptist, forerunner to the Messiah. He came through.
 2. But then in [Luke 2](#), there's Simeon and Anna and they too are described in remarkably similar ways.

- a. So of Simeon Luke says: “Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel” (v. 25). And the Holy Spirit revealed to him he wouldn’t die until he saw the Christ face to face.
 - i. And he’s there in the temple, and in come Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus. And light breaks in, consolation, the kingdom of God right there in his hands.
 - b. And then Luke immediately jumps to Anna and writes: “³⁶And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin,³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (vv. 36–38). This woman lived as a widow probably for some six decades, she was in the dark with God, just looking and waiting.
 - i. And then she too sees the Christ and can sense it: redemption is drawing near.
- D. This is what I mean when I say take a number. Do you want to tell your story of God’s faithfulness and provision? Get in line. There’s a lot of people who can and will do the same.
- 1. Rev. 7 says around the throne in heaven, there’s a great multitude of people from every nation, and tribe, and people, and tongue, and there’s so many that “no one could number [them]” (v. 9). And they’re all singing and praising God.
 - a. And they all have stories to tell—stories uniquely theirs and yet just like everyone else’s. Stories of God’s faithfulness and redemption and lovingkindness in Jesus. God will be faithful to you.
- E. And you know maybe you’re not even a Christian, but you’re in the dark.
- 1. Listen, I don’t know of any other way to get out. Oh sure there are a lot of people who will come peddling their answers, their solutions, but there is only one who’s gone down into the darkness of the grave and come out alive to talk about it—never to die again. His name is Jesus. But some call him “the light of the world” (John 8:12).
- F. So come, you’re in darkness, wherever you’re at, take stand, take a step, and take a number.