



**BELIEVERS CHAPEL**

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Suffering Savior Matthew 27: 57-61

“The Burial of Christ”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] We thank Thee, Lord, for the privilege of the study of the Scriptures again. We thank Thee for Jesus Christ who not only went to the cross for us, but there suffered and died, and so submitted himself to the Father’s will that as a result we have the joy of an everlasting salvation, and we thank Thee too, Lord, that in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, the holiness and righteousness of our God has been satisfied, and we are able to go free. We pray tonight as we continue our study of his ministry in his death and in his atonement that our understanding may grow again, increase and lead to a deeper relationship with Thee. We commit each one present to Thee. We pray Thy blessing upon each as we study. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

[Message] Tonight, I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 27, verse 57 through 61. Verse 57 through verse 61. The subject for tonight is the Burial of Christ, and it’s relationship to the atonement, and then on Wednesday night of next week, I want to take up the resurrection of Jesus Christ in connection with the atonement, and then the following Wednesday night we’ll begin our series of studies of four or five times, which will conclude our total series on the subject of the design of the atonement or, For Whom Did Christ Die? But tonight we are turning to Matthew chapter 27, and I

want you to read with me. I’ll read. You follow along in your Bible. Verses 57 through 61. Matthew chapter 27, verses 57 through 61,

“When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus’ disciple: He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. And there were Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre.”

Humanly speaking, Golgotha was a very dark day with the cause of Jesus Christ. The curtains seem to have fallen upon unrelieved tragedy. Nothing remains but the burial, which is the last stage of the humiliation of the Lord Jesus. Many of you in this auditorium, grew up in churches in which you recited the apostle’s creed every Sunday morning. Some of you probably didn’t pay much attention to what you were saying, but nevertheless, you recited it, and you remember that you said something like this. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, who is conceived by the Holy Ghost. Born of the Virgin Mary. Suffered under Pontus Pilate. Was crucified, dead and buried.” And you probably gained the impression, and rightfully so, that when you said, “and buried” that was just about the last stage of the humiliation of the Lord Jesus.

One of the commentators has said, concerning the burial of Christ, “Man’s last and worst was done. The king was dead, and from now on only tender hands will touch him, and loving eyes see him.” There is one thing, I think interesting about the burial account, that has always interested me, and just recently when I was doing a little further study, I discovered one or two other points that were strange about the burial account. In fact, it is almost stranger than fiction to read the burial account of the Lord Jesus. Surely if you had known the facts of the life of our Lord, and known the people

with whom he lived, whom he loved, with whom he ministered, you surely would have expected one of them to come forward and claim the body of the Lord Jesus for the burial.

Would you not have expected that Mary would have come forward and asked for the body of her son, or would you not have expected, if not Mary, who may have been cared for by one of the men, one of apostles to come forward and claim the body of the Lord Jesus, or would you not have expected if one of the apostles, did not someone of the women who ministered to him in life, would you not have expected one of them to come forward?

But instead of that two people who hardly appear at all in the gospel records come forward. Joseph of Arimathea, about whom we know nothing at this time, and Nicodemus, the mention of whom in the gospel of John is in the context first of a person who has not come to faith in Christ, of one who seems to be under sided later on, but who at this last stage in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ makes a stand for him. Another strange thing about it gathers around the fact that it was contrary to Jewish custom for Jesus Christ to be buried as he was. Josephus said, a blasphemer was to be buried in an ignominious and obscure manner. Even Roman law dictated the laws of all honors in death, and even the right of burial rested with the decree of the magistrates, and permission to bury someone convicted of high treason, as our Lord was according to the Roman charge, was denied on principle and yet, permission was given for the burying of him.

In Jewish law, it was the custom to bury the dead even of their enemies. Jewish law specified that those hung should be taken down and buried before sundown, and we see some reflection of that in the gospel recorded, but for those who were to be buried in this ignominious and obscure manner, there was an area far outside the city of Jerusalem, which was reserved and convened for the burial of such executed criminals, but Jesus Christ was not buried in that common burying ground, and as I mentioned the

request for the body of our Lord, did not come from any one of his relatives. It is surely an account that is stranger than fiction, and I guess that the lesson that we are to learn from that is simply this. If this account were forgery, if it truly were fiction, it never would have been written in this way. It would have been written in accord with what was known of the conditions and laws of the time. And the fact that it is written in this way, drawing obviously critical eyes toward it, is one of the implicit evidences of the genuineness of the burial accounts of the Lord Jesus.

We want tonight to look briefly first at the men who buried him, and then we want to take a look briefly at the method, by which he was buried, but spend most of our time upon the theological significance of the burial of the Lord Jesus. The two men who cooperated in the burial of the Lord Jesus were Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

Now, here in this particular account, we read simply, “There came a rich man of Arimathea named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus’ disciple.” If you put the accounts in Luke and Mark and Matthew together, you learn this about Joseph of Arimathea, in the first place, he was rich. I don’t know what that means, whether that means he has two hundred and eighteen million dollars like Rockefeller, or whether it means that he only a few hundred thousand in those days, I don’t know, but I know this, he was something that I would like to be. He was rich, and whether it was a couple of hundred thousand dollars or two hundred and eighteen million, that’s what I would like to be. He was rich, and I must confess, I look at him with some coveting.

Now, other things that are said about him are far more significant. I can tell some of you are smiling because you see in me something that reflects you. [Laughter] Now, the second thing, and the more important thing, and the thing that I want to talk about a little more seriously, Luke says that he is a good and righteous man. Now, that is an interesting statement about a man who’s Christianity we know nothing about, other than these incidental references. He was a good and righteous man, and also Luke says that he was a man, who was in the minority in the hour of the trial of our Lord, or else he

was absent for he did not vote to condemn our Lord. So evidentially he had come to faith in Jesus Christ. He had not made an open testimony of his convictions concerning the Lord Jesus and I say, since he was from Arimathea, it is possible that since the first trial at which our Lord was condemned was held hurriedly. He may not have been summoned or may not have had time to come to the trial, or else he did not vote. But he did not cast his vote for the conviction of the Lord Jesus. Some of the other accounts say that he was a counselor.

Now, that means that he was a member of the grand counsel of the San Hedron. He was one of the important men of Judea, and then the accounts agree that he was a disciple of the Lord Jesus, and another one says that he was waiting for the consummation of the kingdom. So he was a man who was committed to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a rich man. He was an important man in Israel. He had a Christian faith in our Lord and a faith that was eschatological. He was looking for the second coming, or the coming, I should say, of the Messiah.

The other man is just as interesting. Turn with me over to the Johannine account in chapter 19 of his gospel, for there we have mention of Nicodemus. John chapter 19 in verse 38. Oh, there was one other thing in which the Johannine account mentions about Joseph that you will see. He was a disciple of the Lord Jesus, but John says that he didn’t say anything about it because he was afraid of the Jews. Verse 38 of John chapter 19 reads,

“And after this Joseph of Arimathea being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore and took the body of Jesus and there came also Nicodemus, who at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes about a hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, in which

was never man yet laid.” (I want you to notice that expression.) “There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.”

The second man then is Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a companion in spirit with Joseph of Arimathea. I think this confirms the fact that one of the reasons that Nicodemus came to the Lord Jesus by night was because he did not want to be seen coming to the Lord Jesus. He was a man whom, if we can believe the statement made in John chapter 3 verse 9, was the teacher in Israel. He was the outstanding Bible teacher in Israel among the Jews. It is possible that he was one of the men who went out to see John the Baptist. I would think that that is highly likely since a deputation was sent out to question John the Baptist, it would be likely that he would be one of the ones considered for that task, and if so, it would account for his knowledge of the Lord Jesus. It would account for the fact that he might come to him and ask him a question as he did. But in that 3rd chapter of the gospel of John, we can at least say this. He manifested a desire to have a question about spiritual things answered by the Lord Jesus.

“We know that thou art a teacher come from God,” he said. “For no man can do these signs which you are doing except God be with him.” It seems to me that he falls into the category of the rich young ruler and the lawyer who came to Jesus and asked about a way by which they might inherit the Kingdom of God. Our Lord evidentially thinks he’s going to ask that kind of question because he responds to Nicodemus by simply saying, “Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.” He evidentially read his mind, and when Nicodemus said, “No man can do these miracles that Thou doest except God be with him.” Jesus anticipated that he would go on to say, “What good things shall I do that I many enter into the Kingdom of God?” And our Lord answers him by saying that he must be born again.

The next thing that we read about Nicodemus is given for us in the 7th chapter in the gospel of John, and there we find Nicodemus standing up in defense of the Lord Jesus. In John chapter 7, in verse 45 we read,

“Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees and they said unto him, Why have ye not brought him?” (They had been sent out to take the Lord Jesus.) “The officers answered, Never man spoke like this man. Then answered them the Pharisees, Are ye also deceived? Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed. Nicodemus saith unto them, he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them, Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?”(They turned to Nicodemus and said rather sharply to him,) “Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.”

So Nicodemus is a person who arises from desire toward the Lord Jesus through defense of him in this meeting of the counsel to a devotion to him. He is the one to whom our Lord said, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, “Even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” And it is evident that finally, by the time of the burial of our Lord Jesus, Nicodemus has finally seen that brazen serpent that our Lord referred to. He is an admirable man, I must confess, it’s difficult for an old man to be open hearted enough to want to learn something, and he evidentially was an old man because he asked the question, “How can a man, when he is old, be born again? Can he enter into his mother’s womb and be born again?” But he was old, and he was open hearted. Most of us who are old, we are in the eyes of the young people at least, out of it, and many of us also are so fixed and settled in our ways that we cannot possibly change, but here is a man who is different. I think some of the most thrilling things in the ministry of the gospel are the conversions of old men. I’ve seen some old men converted, and it is really a thrilling thing to see an old man, who has lived a certain way for many, many years suddenly transformed through faith in Jesus Christ.

Well, the method of the burial is described for us in the Mattian account. The two men go to Pilate and they request the body. In the 58th verse of Matthew chapter 27 he writes that, “They came to Pilate and begged or asked for themselves.” (And Joseph is

spoken of individually here,) “He asked for himself, the body of Jesus.” And so nervely, audaciously, braving ostracism, and also retaliation on the part of his Jewish friends, he went to Pilate, and boldly ask for the body of the Lord. Pilate marvels. Death usually occurs several days later, sometimes of starvation, sometimes of gangrene. The custom of the *crurifragium* was a terrible custom. The Roman soldiers, when someone was crucified and was hanging upon the cross after a few hours of the agony, they frequently took a heavy stone hammer or a metal hammer, and just hammered the legs of the individuals who were hanging in order to break the bones so that gangrene would be sure to enter in, and the result was that their death was hastened by the gangrene that came, and so Pilate is a little in wonder and amazement at the fact that the Lord Jesus was already dead.

Well, the Johannine account has described the burial, we need not talk about it, when we talk about the resurrection we’ll have something to say about it, and the account of the burial ends with some of the women over against the tomb, observing, notice this because it will have some significance in connection with the resurrection, they are observing the place, and the manner of the burial of the Lord Jesus. Well, let’s come now finally to the meaning of the burial, and theologically I want to try to show first of all, that the burial of the Lord Jesus is the completion of the humiliation of the Lord Jesus. We often say, and we say rightly, that the finished work of our Lord Jesus was accomplished upon the cross. We affirm that when he cried out, “My God, my God, Why has Thou forsaken me?” That his spiritual sufferings ended. His physical sufferings ended when he breathed his last breath, and gave up the ghost, and bowed his head, so that on the cross he completed the work of redemption.

Now, that is true in one sense and we want to be sure to completely affirm it, but it is the opinion of many theologians that our Lord’s sufferings can be divided into two categories. There are those sufferings that are active. That is there are those sufferings into which he entered with full understanding, in full consciousness. And then there are those sufferings that are passive.

Now, we can say this, that when our Lord Jesus is buried, the active suffering is over. The “it is finished” has taken place. The atonement has been accomplished. The passive sufferings of our Lord are not sufferings that pertain to atonement. Atonement took place when our Lord uttered those words, “My God, my God why has Thou forsaken me?” And then as the issue of that, died physically, but his passive suffering continues. And further it is a suffering in humiliation. There are three reasons why our Lord’s burial should be regarded as a humiliation. In the first place, you’ll remember back in the Genesis, one of the judgments for sin was expressed in the words of God, “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” So the placing of a body in a grave, and then the transformation by corruption of the body into dust again is part of the judgment for sin. It is part of the humiliation, so the return to dust is a judgment for sin.

Now, of course in our Lord’s case, that is not going to happen because our Lord has accomplished the atonement, and as far as he was concerned it was impossible that he should beholden of death, but by entering into the tomb, he exposes himself to the passive kind of suffering.

A second reason why the burial is a humiliation, the very physical act of placing the body in a sepulchre, in the earth, is itself a testimony to humiliation. A burial is a going down, and the idea of going down contains within it, the idea of humiliation. And the third reason why this is an act of humiliation, I need a little more time to explain. You remember then in passages of the New Testament, the work of our Lord Jesus is described in its objective stages. For example, it is described as being a time when our Lord was crucified. He was buried, and he rose again from the dead. These are the great events of his suffering, which make up the gospel. In fact when we speak about the gospel, we are preaching that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he rose again on the third day, and that he was seen of witnesses.

Now, it is evident from this then that there is such a thing as the objective stages of our Lord’s life. He was hanging upon the cross. He died. He was buried. He rose

again from the dead. These things have to do with him objectively. Now then, in those same accounts in which we find these statements of the objective events of our Lord’s life, we frequently notice the subjective application of those great facts to the Christians who have believed in him. Take Romans chapter 6 for example. In Romans chapter 6, it is stated in the context that our Lord died, that he was buried, and that he came forth in newness of life, but it is also said that the believers were united with him, in his death, in his burial, and in his resurrection, so the objective facts of our Lord’s ministry are parallel with the subjective application to the believers who are united with him. For you see, he stood for us as our representative.

Now, moving over to passages such as in the book of Colossians, when we are told that because we have died with Christ, and we have been resurrected together with him, we ought to put off the things that have to do with the old life, and put on the garments that have to do with the new life, it’s evident that the putting off is connected with the death and burial, and the putting on is connected with the resurrection. So the very parallels between these two things, the objective and the subjective sides and the identification of the burial as having to do with the humiliating side of the ministry of our Lord is evidence of the fact that the humiliation, that the burial itself is an humiliation.

I want to think for just a moment about our Lord and the sepulchre. We know that it is not only the being buried which constituted Christ’s humiliation. He was also being humiliated as an effective mediator. His own funeral guests, if we may think of our Lord surrounded by his friends, as surrounded by funeral guests, did not understand him. At our Lord’s burial there is nobody to stand around and give a funeral oration in which they speak of the good points of the life of the individual whose body they are burying. Every funeral is a beginning of the process by which our human glamour fades. The impression, which we have made upon others, begins to wean because we are no longer seen, and our personality loses its power of self-expression. We cannot stand up and speak for ourselves.

That reminds me of a story of a black man who was at a wake, and he was one of the deacons of the church, and he was supposed to just sit and watch. Now, as used to be the custom, the members of the family were very outspoken in their grief. And as he was sitting over by one of the windows with one of the other deacons, the members of the family would come in before the body, and they would moan, and then one came in particular and was saying, “Speak to me, John. Oh, John speak to me. Speak to me, John. Speak to me.” And this went on with more and more emotion, and finally the deacon turned to his friend and said, “Course, he ain’t gonna speak to him, but if he do, that’s my window.” [Laughter]

Now, a body at a funeral does not have the benefit of self-explanation. We become a name. We are given the exegesis of others. We are a figure. We are a symbol. The burial begins with this inevitable relinquishment. It’s a stripping of our powers over against the world. It is a confirmation of the fact that we have departed out of time, and we have lost our hold upon time.

Now, in the case of our Lord Jesus, this is something of significance. It is not of great significance when I die, and you have the opportunity to look at my body, it won’t be of much significance that I’m not able to get up and speak, and say a word to you. I don’t want to scare you. It wouldn’t really make a whole lot of difference, but you see in our Lord Jesus Christ’s case, it makes a great deal of difference. Our Lord is not the usual person. Their burying him was not a linking of his death with the whole history of the Messianic redemption. By burying our Lord Jesus Christ, they simply linked his dying with the concatenation of every day events. They, in the very fact that they buried the Messiah, they thought that very fact was a testimony, not only to our Lord’s humiliation, but the further humiliation of the fact that his close disciples did not believe that he would rise from the dead. Never had our Lord been so concealed as to his person, than when his body was placed in that sepulchre.

We talk about the hidden-ness of the Messianic character of the Lord Jesus because he went about among men with a body such as you and I have. We even have him referred to by the scholars as a secret Messiah, as a hidden Messiah, as a person who did not want to communicate to others, the fact that he was the Messiah. The emphasis rests upon the fact that he is not known for what he really is. Well, there is a sense of course, in which that is true. There is a discrepancy between the man Jesus, in his ministry and the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. We see the humanity, but we do not see the divine person, most of those who saw him, would have said afterwards, but the discrepancy between the majesty of God, for our Lord possesses the majesty of God. The discrepancy between the majesty of God in the person of Jesus Christ and the body of the man Jesus was never so great as when our Lord’s body, dead, was placed in that sepulchre.

Never could you have measured in greater degree, the difference between the two natures of our Lord, as at that time. A human body, the life gone out of it, and the divine personality of our Lord Jesus, this was a humiliation. His own peon of praise about the stone, which should be made the head of the corner, was a song that they could not understand. They Jews, the enemies of our Lord were more disturbed about the possibility of the resurrection than the apostles themselves. His own friends had no idea that he would rise from the dead. At least the Jews said, “That schemer said he was going to rise. We better do something about it.” They never anticipated it. So as you looked at the body of our Lord you might say, “Is this all that he left behind in the world? Is the whole of the seed of the woman that was to crush the head of the serpent?” Name one spiritual leader or one spiritual rebel who was so poor as this in terms of people of disciples who understood. You can hardly find one. Our Lord is probably the most unrecognized of all spiritual leaders in the Christian movement. They all forsook him and fled. Now that is humiliation.

Second, theologically this was the inception of his exaltation as well. I think this is the time when humiliation becomes exaltation, and there are just some hints that the burial is the precise moment where humiliation begins to turn into exaltation. I mentioned the statement there in John chapter 19. Turn over with me to Luke chapter 19 in verse 30. There we have some indication of what is going to take place. Luke chapter 19 in verse reads, “Saying, Go into the village opposite you; in the which at your entering ye shall find a colt tied, on which yet never man sat: loose him, and bring him here.”

Now, you remember a long time ago, if you were here when I gave the first message of the series which had to do with our Lord’s triumphal ministry, triumphal entry into the city, I mentioned the fact that when he came in the city, he sat upon an animal upon which never a man had sat, and I commented upon the fact that it was the custom in eastern lands when they had a visitor who was a very important visitor they always did something new, as a token of appreciation and respect and reverence for the leader. Occasionally, if the man was a great enough man, they would build an entire new road into the city, so that he would be the first one to come in upon the road. Great stress rests upon the fact that our Lord rode upon this animal upon which no other person had been riding. The reason being that in our Lord’s triumphal entry there is an attempt to make recognizable the fact that he was the king of Israel.

Now, I think that it is very striking that in John chapter 19, when we read that he was to be buried, he was buried in a new sepulchre, and it is specifically stated in verse 41, of John chapter 19, “in which was never man yet laid.” So here in the beginning there is indication of the fact that our Lord is not just a humiliated person, but the humiliation is now beginning to transform itself into the exaltation. Further, in John, it is stated that our Lord was buried in a garden. He wasn’t buried in that place that was reserved for criminals outside the city. He was buried in a garden.

Now, Adam sinned in a garden, and men were driven out of the Garden of Eden. Here is one who has accomplished the work of redemption, and he is buried in a garden

from which he shall rise from the dead. Someone has said, “The first Adam sowed the seed of death in a garden. The last Adam sowed the seed of life in a garden.” From the garden tomb the way is opened to the garden of God. So theologically then the burial of our Lord Jesus is the completion of his humiliation, but it also is the place from which the exaltation of the Lord Jesus shall take place. Finally, practically, it is an illustration of the delivering power of Jesus Christ’s death. Did you notice that statement in John chapter 19 in verse 38, that Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly on account of the fear of the Jews?

Now, in Mark chapter 15, in verse 43, we have a word that I think contrasts with it, and leads us to some important truth. In the Markan account, and in the 43rd verse, when Mark says that Joseph went and asked Pilate for the body of Jesus, he adds a little adverb, which is important. He says, “and went in boldly unto Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.” So here we have a secret disciple of whom it is said that now he enters into the presence of Pilate and boldly requests the body of our Lord.

Now, I want to point out something before I go into what I want to say about this. It seems quite evident that Joseph of Arimathea must have been around the cross of our Lord Jesus during his suffering. He anticipated that it would be necessary to take that body from the grave before sundown, and of course he must have come rather quickly into Pilate because he had to get permission from Pilate, then he had to go back out to Golgotha, and there go through the procedure of taking to body down.

Then he must take the body to the place where it would be buried before sundown because otherwise a curse would rest upon the land. For a body that had been hanged or crucified such as this, according to Jewish law and Old Testament law was not to hang upon the cross at the beginning of the next day at sundown. It seems very evident that he had been out at the cross. He makes his way back in. He gets permission. He goes back out, takes the body, then takes it to the burial ground before sundown, and remember our Lord was on the cross from 9 in the morning until 3 in the

afternoon. That does not leave him a whole lot of time to do this, but he did. But he went in “boldly” and requested the body of our Lord. Some men, naturally, are very bold. You have some friends that very bold. They are just naturally that way. Some men are self assertive, naturally. Some men are intrusive. Some men are very aggressive. You know the type. You know men that are retiring.

Now, some men are I say, intrusive, aggressive, self-assertive, bold even impudent. It has been said that some men rush in where angels fear to tread. Often they are fearless because they are brainless, but nevertheless, they are fearless, and Joseph of Arimathea is obviously not that kind. He was a timid man, evidentially because for fear of the Jews he did not say anything about his belief in the Lord Jesus. Nicodemus is obviously a timid man because he comes to the Lord by night. So here are two naturally timid and cautious men, who somehow break with their own natures in a sense they defy what they are naturally, and as a result of defying what they are naturally, they have conquered eternally, and we are forever grateful for the decision that transformed Joseph and Nicodemus from timid cautious disciples to bold outspoken, fearless disciples of Jesus Christ. How did it happen? I do not think there is any other explanation that is satisfactory other than the fact that these two men observed what happened to Jesus Christ, and the impression of the cross of our Lord Jesus gripped them.

You know, it was said to Mary, early in the life of our Lord that she would experience a very great sorrow. A sword would pierce through her heart, that the thoughts of many should be revealed. For the cross of Jesus Christ is a great divider. It is, as you know, a divider between those who profess him and those who truly have confessed him. There are many people who confess that they are Christians, but when they are brought face to face to the cross of Jesus Christ, and what that says about what they are, and about the only way that they may obtain a standing before God, they are repelled by the fact of the cross, and turn away from it. As a matter of fact, some of those

that are faced with the cross become enemies of the cross even though they confess, try to confess at the same time that they are Christians.

Now, here are two men. They had been taken captive by the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. They had a feeble and fearful faith in their hearts. They had observed the life of our Lord Jesus. They had probably observed some miracles, or they had heard the reports of his miracles. They had listened to some of his discourses. They surely had heard many people speak of his discourses, but his life and his miracles, and his discourses did not bring from them a bold avowal of faith. I do not think they ever do. I do not think it is possible to have a bold avowal of faith for only from the life and the signs and the discourses of Jesus of Nazareth. Then those two men stood by the cross, and they saw their guilt. They saw the loveliness of the savior. They saw the red love that was expressed in our Lord’s suffering and an irresistible appeal of the cross fell upon them. How did it fall upon them? Well, there is only one way by which it fell upon them. It was the Holy Spirit speaking to them. What the theologians call the *testimonium internum spiritu sancta*, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, which came upon them with such conviction that there came to them a certainty of the reality of the events of that cross that they had divine significance. The spirit of God testifies to the divinity of the Scriptures and to the truthfulness and certainty of the events of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. That’s why you became a Christian because you are the recipient of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

You know, when Paul came to the Corinthians, he said, “I didn’t come to you with excellency of speech or of wisdom. I came to you preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified. I determined not to preach anything but that. My speech was not in enticing words of man’s wisdom. I was in your midst with fear and much trembling that your faith might not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.” And so he came. He preached the gospel. The Holy Spirit used the word, and brought home tremendous conviction because you know, if were to stand before you and preach the Christian faith

so intellectually that you were persuaded by reason to embrace Christ because of the reasonableness of the Christian faith, the historicity of the events of the gospel, the reasonableness of the testimony to the resurrection.

If I were to preach, and you were to respond in that way, then you would be putty in the hands of some superior reasoner who would come along and punch a few holes, outwardly at least, in to the intellectually presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and you see ultimately if that is the ground of your faith, the ground of your faith is really human reason. The ground of our faith can never be anything but the testimony of the Holy Spirit of God. It’s the kind of thing you cannot argue with. You look at something and you say, “It’s black, and this is white.” That’s something you know intuitively. It’s black, and this is white. I couldn’t prove that’s black to you, couldn’t prove that’s white. You know it. You know it immediately. And the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is something that comes to an individual through the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and then your faith rests in the power of God.

Now, the Holy Spirit does not do anything but he does not use anything else other than the word of God. He uses the word. These two are together, the Word and the spirit, but your faith rests in God, thus it’s not swayed by human reason. It’s not swayed by human experience, so you come to me and give me some objection to the facts of the New Testament. That does not disturb my faith. I know that sooner or later I’ll find the answer to your question, but in the mean time I have had the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Scriptures in my heart, the *testimonium internum spiritu sancta*, I even like the Latin expression. The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, that is that upon which we ground our faith. You cannot argue with it. Nobody can argue with it. It’s God’s testimony, and God has made himself known in that form of revelation.

Now, these men listened and observed, and they saw the cross and the Holy Spirit brought upon them the irresistible appeal of that cross. Perhaps other things contributed to their feeling. They saw the sun go out, and suddenly darkness came over earth. It’s

almost as if the sun gave testimony to the Son of God, and veiled it’s face. They may have felt the tremors of the earth. It’s almost as if the earth owned the Son of God, and trembled at its very heart. They heard later, no doubt, that the veil of the temple was writ and twain from top to bottom. It was as if the whole Jewish system shuttered because it’s end had come, and it too testified to the fulfillment of all of it’s ministry and sacrifices and priesthood in the suffering of the Lord Jesus, and it was not long that the graves opened and the dead came out, and another testimony was given to him, and so faith broke it’s bonds of the fear that had gripped it, and Joseph, and his friend did their daring and costly and lovely deed. They went into Pilate, the Roman, and said, “We want the body for ourselves. We want to give him burial.”

Mr. Spurgoen used to like to say, “The cross is wondrous magnet that draws to itself all men who are of the true medal.” I believe that. I believe the sentiment of that. “The cross is a wondrous magnet that draws to itself all who are of the true medal.” That’s what our Lord means, when he talks about good ground, good ground. Are you good ground? Are you of the true medal? Is there something about the cross of Jesus Christ that really grips your hearts? I think this is the thing that accounts for the fact that when you read the gospel accounts, the account of the passion of our Lord is out of all proportion to his life and ministry. Think of this gospel of Mark, sixteen chapters, but think of how much is devoted to the last week of our Lord’s ministry. It’s out of all proportion to the three years of his ministry. If you were to just take the three years of the ministry and divide it up into sixteen chapters, you would probably have a little paragraph on the last week, but they thought that it was so significant that it is the climatic section of each of the gospels, and it is of the greatest significance that we understand plainly the significance of the cross of Jesus Christ as these men did.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning has written Aurora Leigh. I like a verse of that. She writes, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush a fire with God, but only he who sees takes off his shoes the rest sit round and pick blackberries.” It’s amazing that

in the face of the cross of Jesus Christ we can metaphorically sit around and pick blackberries, but that’s because the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit has not gripped us.

There are many of us who are like the men who observed our Lord around the cross, those Romans, those Jews. They have been at the place of divine revelation. They have been at the place that is the holiest place of all, but to them, it’s nothing. There are people who come in this auditorium Sunday after Sunday. They are at the place where to word of God is proclaimed, where the eternal verities are proclaimed, but for them it’s nothing more than if they were in any common ordinary lecture hall, and then you know there are Christians like Joseph and like Nicodemus, they treasure the words of our Lord. They dislike those who dislike him. They sit in our pews, and they are happy to be here, but for some love of place or pleasure or position, they have not really given themselves over into the hands of the Lord Jesus. It may be that they are afraid of the mockery of their friends.

Henry Martin used to say he could take a whole lot better brick bats than he could the sneers to his friends, and I think I understand what he is talking about. I remember my children writing me when they were in college, and saying the biggest struggle we have is to keep giving testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ, and not being afraid of being odd. I can remember my daughter writing me that. She said, “The biggest struggle I have is that I don’t want to appear odd to my friends, and yet I know that if I give the kind of testimony that I should, I’m going to appear odd to a lot of them.” There are many timid and weak people like Joseph and like Nicodemus, defeated, enslaved, failing, indifferent, empty within, and the only answer is to stand before that cross and measure your life, your interests, your pursuits, your aims, by his love, and by his grace, and then boldly take your stand for him. I do not know of any other way, if you desire this to happen in your life, than to get off by yourself and open up the Scriptures, and begin to feed quietly and by yourself upon the word of God, allowing the Holy Spirit to bring you back again

in experience to the situation that you find in the Lord Jesus, so in a sense that you stand around that cross, and you measure your life by what you read there, asking the Holy Spirit to speak to you, and to give you that internal testimony that transforms the life. May God help us to do that. Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father we are grateful to Thee for the testimony of Joseph and Nicodemus. Truly, Lord, they do speak to us. They speak to me. They speak to my friends. They speak to our friends. It reminds us again that the center of life is the great cross, not only a passage from death to life, but from life to deeper life, and we do ask, oh God, that Thou wilt give us the experience of Joseph and Nicodemus, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit that transforms and changes.

We pray for each one present. We pray, O God, that Thou wilt minister to each in the inner man, in order that Jesus Christ will be honored and glorified, not that we may be successful or great, but that Christ may be honored and glorified, and may the depth of gratitude that we have for what has been accomplished for us be deepened and widened and enlarged and touch others. For Jesus Christ’s sake we pray. Amen.