



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 27:57–61; John 19:38–42

“The Burial of Christ”

Gospel of Matthew

TRANSCRIPT

In the New Testament, one of the things that the elders are responsible for is the recognition of the men who have been appointed by the Holy Spirit as elders and deacons. One of the primary basis on which the elders act not knowing any better way to act is the observation of the men in the assembly who function as the New Testament sets forth the function of the deacon and the elder. One of the easiest ways to see that the Lord has appointed a person to the certain office of elder is that he has begun to function as a shepherd of the flock, meeting the qualifications that the apostle sets forth in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapter 1, and in a few other places where those qualifications are referred to. So when we see someone functioning in the assembly as an elder, that is one of the most important signs that God has, through the Holy Spirit appointed them overseers in the church. And the same holds true for deacons, and we feel that God has given us guidance. So far, we pray that in the future he will continue to give us guidance with regard to the deacons and the elders.

You are, of course, free to come to the elders and say, have you noticed so-and-so? He seems to be functioning as an elder or a deacon, and naturally, we want to be responsive to the things that those of you that form part of the congregation or a part of the flock noticed, because it is possible for us to fail to notice when we should notice those whom God has laid his hands upon for specific service in the local church.

We do hope that you will pray for the elders. We certainly need your prayers constantly, and we hope that you will pray for the deacons, and I think also it's fair to say that we hope that you will pray that the Lord will raise up other elders and other deacons in the ministry of the Lord here in Believers Chapel. As you can see it is very important for the future of the Chapel that we be able by the grace of God to find his precise will for us, because a mistake here can be very very harmful for the future of the work of God, so pray for us, and we will seek to find the Lord's will that he would have us to follow.

In the Scripture reading this morning, we are coming to the burial of our Lord, and I would ask you, if you have your New Testaments, and if you don't have them I would ask you why you don't, [laughter] but anyway, if you have your New Testaments, turn with me to Matthew chapter 27. I want to read a few verses beginning at verse 57 through 61, and then read a few verses from John chapter 19, one of the parallel passages.

Matthew 27:57:

“When the evening was come, there came a rich man of Arimathea,  
named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple.”

The other passages of the Synoptic Gospels add certain features that are very important in understanding the full significance of the description of Joseph and what he did. You may remember that in one of them he is described as an honorable counselor, and then that he waited for the kingdom of God that is given us Mark chapter 13. So he was a rich man who was an honorable counselor who waited for the kingdom of God.

Luke tells us that he was a good and righteous man. Now that of course cannot be said of any man except our Lord Jesus in the fullest sense and is probably to be interpreted in the light of the next statements, and that is, Luke adds, that he did not consent to the council, indeed of the council, in the crucifixion in the Lord Jesus, so he was a good and righteous man in that sense.

John says that he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews. So putting this all together, we have the picture of a man who was a member of the supreme council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. He was a rich man, therefore, an influential man. He was a disciple. He waited for the kingdom of God. He knew something about the messianic promises, but he was a secret disciple because he feared the Jews. I think it was Mr. Spurgeon who said that the fear of man is a plant that needs to be uprooted. He said, “If I had that plant around my house, I would put it in a place where it got little water and no sunlight, and then I would beg cutting from a better plant.” The fear of man; so he was a man who feared men at this point.

Now we read in verse 58 that he went to Pilate and begged the body of Jesus. Mark adds the significant fact that he went and boldly begged for 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 sepulcher and departed. And there were Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sitting over against the sepulcher.”

Will you turn over to John chapter 19, and let me read a few verses beginning with verse 38 for the Johannine account of the burial? John chapter 19 and verse 38,

“And after this Joseph of Arimathea being a disciple of Jesus but secretly for fear of the Jews sought 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 an 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 sepulcher wherein in which was never man yet laid (notice those words, a new sepulcher; no one had been buried there). There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews preparation day (that is, it was a Passover service in the evening and then a feast of bread began the next day) for the sepulcher was near at hand.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his inspired Word.

We are drawing near the end of the exposition of the Gospel of Matthew. There are two final studies, and the Lord-willing, we hope to complete this rather lengthy 101 expositions of the Gospel. Following this, I want to give a much briefer series of messages on the Epistle to the Galatians, and if you are interested in preparing ahead for them, I would suggest that you begin to read the Epistle to the Galatians. The schedule at the present time is for 18 messages, and we will complete that briefer epistle. It's really a change of direction, because we want to talk about the questions of law and grace and the gospel.

I'm sure you know that the Epistle to the Romans is an epistle in which the Apostle Paul tells us what the gospel is, and in the Epistle to the Galatians, he tells us what the gospel is not. Now we are taught, and unfortunately many of us believe this, that it is proper to think positively due to the fact that a great deal of advertisement has been given to the idea that we should think positively. A negative thought is unfortunately, thought to be a bad thought, we have all been—if we have not read—we have been faced with the well-known volume written by a well-known preacher, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Well, let me assure you that there is a power in negative thinking too, the two go hand-in-hand, and if you will read through the Bible, you will see a great deal of so-called negative thinking. It is important at times for us to know the negatives, that the positives may appear in their true light.

Now Galatians is an important epistle if only for that, but it is one of the most magnificent expressions of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its relationship to the principles of law and grace that exists anywhere. Martin Luther called it his Katy Fombora, who was his wife, so Galatians has been called his wife, because it meant so much to him. It's not my wife—I do have a wife—but I want you to know it's a great epistle, and I'm looking forward to that brief exposition of that epistle. So I hope that you will read it a few times before we begin two or three weeks from today.

But this morning we want to continue our exposition of Matthew, and we come to the burial of Christ. Humanly speaking, Golgotha was a very dark and somber day. In fact I think it is probably fair to say that humanly speaking, it was the end of Christianity. Campbell Morgan, the well-known British Bible teacher, once said, “Man's last and worse was done; the king was dead.” And into the sepulcher were placed both Jesus Christ and his cause, so it seemed.

Of course today we are not very disturbed when we read of the rolling of the stone over the sepulcher in which our Lord Jesus had been placed, because we know what happened thereafter. So the peace and the tranquility which we have when we think of the burial of Christ flows from our knowledge of what is going to happen in his resurrection. To us has been revealed the secret of God, the triumphant outcome, but to the disciples it was something that was just too strange to even be reckoned upon. And it is doubtful, at least I think it is doubtful, that a single person really believed that our Lord Jesus would rise again on the third day as he said that he would rise.

Furthermore the humiliation was not over with his death. The burial remained. It follows quickly and on the beginning of the Sabbath the Lord Jesus lay in his tomb. The speed of the burial as made necessary by the requirements of the Old Testament law and the Jewish interpretation of those requirements. In the Old Testament, it is said he that is hanged is accursed of God, and so the Jews believed that it was absolutely essential that anyone who was hanged upon a tree or crucified should be taken down from that cross on the day before the Sabbath and placed in a tomb before the Sabbath began at sundown. After all, Moses must be vindicated at all costs. The Bible, so far as it's literal meaning and their initial interpretation must be carried out, and in this case the irony is rather

excruciating, because here Moses is vindicated, but the one of whom Moses spoke well, he is humiliated. The very moment when the Jewish people sat down on that Friday afternoon, that beginning of Saturday night, when they sat down at even in order to celebrate and enjoy the Passover, at that very moment, when they should have been enjoying the benefits of the saving work of the lamb of God, they were satisfied with the carrying out of the ritual of the Mosaic Law and feeding upon the literal animal of the lamb.

It’s an amazing thing, but it’s an illustration of the providence of God that he has so arranged the affairs of men that they should kill the Passover lamb, the Passover lamb, sit down and feed upon an animal, when they could have been, if enlightened by the Holy Spirit, rejoicing in the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament promises concerning the lamb of God. The explanation, of course, is that they had no life in them. They were accustomed to strain out the gnat and swallow the camel, and so they carefully fulfilled all of the Mosaic ritual and their tradition and in fulfilling them they forget the great fulfillment of our Lord’s sufferings.

The burial and its humiliation is reflected in the Apostle’s Creed which many of us have recited many times in the churches in which we have grown up. I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only begotten son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Ponchos Pilate was crucified dead and buried. There it is in the apostle’s creed.

The burial account in which we now turn is stranger than fiction, and that itself is a fact that argues for its authenticity. Who in the wildest flight of his imagination would ever have guessed that the Lord Jesus would be interred in the tomb of one of the rich men who belonged to the Sanhedrin, one of the council that put him to death? Who would have ever thought that two men from that council should meet together and should bury the Lord Jesus as a king should be buried? But that is what happened. If we had been writing this account, we would have said that Peter came forward, finally, but Peter had run off and had been in hiding like a wounded animal.

Or we might have thought John. After all, John did come back, and the Lord Jesus had a word for him at the cross, but it was not John. Those with more literary ability might have imagined that the women would have come back, or even the Virgin Mary.

But it was Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus, the one who came to Jesus by night, who come forward to bury the body of the Lord Jesus. Why that fact itself, so incredible, indicates the authenticity of this account. No one would have ever imagined this and written this way.

Incidentally, to make it more difficult to believe, the whole proceeding was contrary to Jewish custom. Josephus points out that a blasphemer should be buried in an ignominious and obscure manner, and he was a blasphemer according to their thinking. Furthermore in Levitical literature, it is stated that criminals who have been stoned to death or hanged are to be buried in a potter's field.

But while man proposes it is God who disposes, and centuries before the event the prophet had said what would happen. He said, and they appointed his grave with the wicked. That is what they intended. They fully intended that he be taken down from that cross and thrown into the potter's field and buried there. But then Isaiah adds, yet with a rich man was he in his martyrdom. So God overthrew their plans by his providential hand, and the Lord Jesus whom according to their thinking should have been buried as a blasphemer, was buried as a king.

Now it is an event I think of theological importance. It's of inspiring and practical importance, too, and that's what we want to look at now for a few moments. I think it is proper and fitting for us to say a few words about the men who buried the Lord Jesus, because they are most interesting characters and ones that we might not have thought would have come forward at this time.

The actions of Joseph and his companion betray the fact that the light of the resurrection prophecies had not broken upon them, for they carry out the burial as if this is the final resting place of the Lord Jesus until the last day. No doubt they would have replied, if you had asked them, do you believe in the resurrection, like Martha of Bethany who said, yes, we believe he shall rise again in the

last day. And so the burial is carried out in that way. There is only a glimmering and flickering hope of the dim and distant future as they bury the Lord Jesus.

The references to Joseph are extremely interesting. He was a rich man. He had apparently prospered in his business. He undoubtedly had influence. He had a lovely garden and expensive tomb which he had had hewn out for himself no doubt. His home was on the edge of the city near Mt. Golgotha it would seem from John chapter 19. Furthermore, he was an honorable counselor. That is, he was a member of the respected body of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews. Luke tells us that he was a good and righteous man, and I think he means by that he did not agree with the decision of the council. Whether he was in Arimathea, which is a short distance from Jerusalem and therefore did not attend that night meeting that sudden night meeting at which our Lord was condemned, the Bible does not say. It may well be that he was not there and that's what Luke says when he did not consent to their deed.

On the other hand, it may mean that he really was there and that he spoke up in that council meeting and said he thought it was wrong for them to put Jesus to death. At any rate, he was a dauntless man and had not agreed with the council at least in that, and he had at least in spirit if not in words stood for him while he lived. He knew the case of the council was unjust and illegal, and it couldn't stand the light of the truth. So he was a good and righteous man and he did not agree.

But now John tells us something else about him. Joseph was a man who had a flaw in his faith. He waited for the kingdom of God. He had the hope of the Jews. He had become a disciple of the Lord Jesus, so he was deep down within his heart a true believer. But the flaw in his faith was that he had the fear of men. His faith was still not strong enough to stand the stresses and strains of the public eye. The fear of the Jews gripped his heart, and the joy of the Lord therefore was stifled in his breast.

Now I don't think it needs any application at all for us to realize how close this strikes home to us. It is possible for us to have a genuine faith in the Lord Jesus, but to never say anything about it. It's possible for us in our business to be an honorable man, to be a true believer in Christ, but



when the issues of a man’s worldview come to focus we are quiet. Sometimes our job we think hinges upon it. Sometimes our friendships with our friends hinge upon it. Sometimes our interest we think hinge upon it, and so when the time comes to speak out with a clear word of testimony for Jesus Christ, we are quiet. We are fearful. The fear of man has gripped our hearts. Mr. Spurgeon is right. We ought to take that plant and put in in a place where it gets no water and no sunlight, and beg a cutting from a different kind of plant—the courage of one’s convictions spiritually. The fear of the Jews, then.

Now one can sympathize with Joseph without condoning his silence, because for him to acknowledge the Lord Jesus would have meant ostracism, perhaps persecution no doubt, perhaps even death, because it was not uncommon for a person identified with the Lord Jesus to be martyred, as later history shows. So it might have meant the loss of his status and position and possibly his estate, but nevertheless deep down within, the Holy Spirit had brought a faith in Joseph. And a faith deep down within cannot help but ultimately find it’s expression, and while he can live for a long time with the fear of the Jews in his heart and the faith together, sooner or later it becomes impossible to stand that conflict, and that of course is what happened ultimately to Joseph.

Then there was Nicodemus what an interesting man he was. A noble old man. “How can a man when he is old be born again?” he had said. So I would imagine that Nicodemus was a man of sixty years of age; white hair; a mature man; a man who according to John chapter 3 was the supreme Bible teacher among the Jews.

He was very interested in John the Baptist, and when the Pharisaical party of priests and Levites had gone out to see and hear John and to question him, I’m just assuming that Nicodemus was among them, because he was the teacher of the Jews according to John chapter 3. The Lord Jesus said, “Art thou not a teacher of the Jews, but art thou the teacher of the Jews and you don’t know the principles of the new birth?” So he was a man who should have known a teacher among the children of Israel.

Well he had heard John the Baptist speak, and he had heard John say that he was simply a witness and a testimony. He was an echo the true voice was to come, and furthermore, this person who was coming after him would have a huge latchet that John was even unworthy to unloose. Well that interested Nicodemus and so he came to Jesus by night. I feel certain—I cannot prove it—that Nicodemus was a timid, cautious man just like Joseph, and the fact that it is said more than once in John that he was the one who came to Jesus by night and that he was associated with Joseph of Arimathea, indicates that there were two men who were disciples of the Lord Jesus, ultimately, who were fearful because of the Jews.

We next read of Nicodemus coming to the Lord Jesus by night and saying, “Master we know that thou art a teacher come from God for no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him”—he wanted to know something. Burning in his heart was this desire to know spiritual truth. The Lord Jesus cut through the whole thing, in fact, stopped him. I think he intended to say, you’re a teacher come from God; tell us how we can inherit eternal life. He said, you must be born again Nicodemus.

It’s not a matter of teaching. You don’t get to heaven by being taught certain things. You get to heaven by the new birth. Now of course, that comes from teaching, but it’s the Holy Spirit moving over the heart of man, creating new life which result in faith in the Lord Jesus that brings the forgiveness of sins and justification of life you need to be born again.

Well, Nicodemus also heard from the Lord Jesus about the brazen serpent. He heard him say, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, he saw the brazen serpent, even so the Son of man be lifted up that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Nicodemus left the presence of the Lord Jesus with a whole lot to think about. Later on in the Gospel of John in the 7th chapter, when the chief priest and the Pharisees wanted to seize our Lord and put him to death, it is Nicodemus who stands up in the council and says, “Doth our Lord judge any man before it hear him or know what he doeth?” so God is working in the heart of this Pharisee, and now he defends the Lord Jesus. But it’s ultimately at the burial the desire to know the truth and

the defense of him come to a tremendous and joyous climax in devotion to him. Nicodemus, then, was a man who finally saw the true brazen serpent, the Lord Jesus, who had been made sin for sinners.

The method of the burial is described very briefly in the Gospel of Matthew. Joseph, in spite of the precepts of the Law of Moses that said you should not touch a dead body, that would defy you, but he was guided by the Holy Spirit in such a way that even though he didn't fully understand they were no longer under law and it's requirements, he nevertheless went and took the body which would have defiled him according to the ancient interpretation of the Mosaic Law or the ancient Mosaic Law. But you see, the veil of the temple has been rent in twain from top to bottom, and the law, the cultus, has been done away with and it's all right now to put a hand upon a dead body. He probably didn't realize all the theology of that as we do today, but still he went and he requested the body of the Lord Jesus, audaciously, boldly, approached Pilate. What an amazing statement is made there, and no doubt it was bold because the very fact that he went and asked for it meant that he exposed himself to a great deal of danger perhaps death.

Pilate was surprised that the Lord Jesus was already dead. When people were crucified it was a custom for the soldiers to break the bones of the individuals on the cross and this hastened death because this person could hang on a cross for several days, and so they would break the bones in order that gangrene would set in and that would hasten the death. When they came to the Lord Jesus to break the bones of his body, he was already dead. Now the Old Testament said not a bone of him shall be broken. And John in the 19th chapter points out that that itself was a fulfillment of Scripture. He had already given his spirit into the hands of the Father.

Well that puzzled Pilate a little bit, so he asked the centurion to go out to check this that he was already dead, and when he found out that he was, he gave the body to Joseph and Nicodemus. And they went out to the cross, braving the ostracizing and possible retaliation of the fellow councilmen, and there they lowered the cross, extracted the nails from the hands and feet of our Lord, took the body, no doubt washed it, then put it in a clean linen cloth and made some

preparation for burial—not completely—for we shall see for the ladies went out on Sunday morning to complete the preparations.

But they placed the body in the new hewn grave in the face of a stone hill. It was a nervy thing to do to place in the family burial place the body of a man who was officially a criminal, and here is a counselor of the Sanhedrin who had a tomb just for himself and his family and he is going to put the body of this hated criminal and blasphemer in his tomb on his own property. You cannot help but admire the love of these men, but it was a love that did not have hope. Not a single one in my opinion really believed that on Sunday morning that tomb would be empty. Edersham says, “Behind him had closed the gate of Hades, but upon them rather than upon him had fallen the shadows of death and stronger than death was love.”

What’s the meaning of the burial? I suggest to you that there are three things that is meant by this burial. In the first place from the theological standpoint it is the completion of the humiliation of the Lord Jesus. It is one of the neglected facets of the study of our Lord that no one or almost no one has made much of a study of the burial of our Lord and its theological significance. What does it mean? What’s its place in the redemptive work?

Well I think the first significance of the burial is simply this: that it is the completion of his self-humiliation. It might seem that this could not be so since while alive on the cross the Lord Jesus cried out it is finished, so if we hear him say it is finished can there be any further self-humiliation? Well yes I think there can be, and I will try to explain why that agrees with the statement, it is finished, in just a moment. After all, he was submitting voluntarily to the full judgment from sin. He had died physically, and the Scriptures had said dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return. So the Lord Jesus, in order that the fullness of the humiliation may reach its climax submits to the ultimate humiliation to having his body placed in the ground. After all in Genesis chapter 3 it had been said, in the sweat of thy face thou shall eat bread till thy return into the ground, for out of it was thou taken, for dust thou art and unto dust shall thy return. So the death, the burial and the grave are a trilogy of humiliation for sin.

In addition the act of burial of going down. We take a body and we place it in the grave. That very fact suggests humiliation. What are we saying when we put a body in the grave? Why we are saying that this body is filthy and corrupt. If it is left here in our presence soon it will stink. I'm sorry I must use the word, but that is exactly what we mean. So we place a body in the grave because we do not want to have that filthy, stinking body in our midst. So when our Lord Jesus Christ's body is placed in the grave the very fact that we put it down in the grave is an evidence of the humiliation of the son of man. He permitted that.

Now then how may we still then speak it is finished, if this is part of his self-humiliation? Well the Reformed theologians used to speak about his active sufferings and his passive sufferings. They also spoke of his active obedience and his passive obedience. His active obedience being his keeping of the law in a 100% way, and his passive obedience, his suffering of the penalty of the law. But his active suffering is the suffering while he is alive and conscious in bodily form. His passive suffering is what happened after he has given his spirit to the Father and his body is placed in the grave. So when he cried out, it is finished, the active sufferings were over, but the passive sufferings were not.

Now these are non-atoning sufferings, because the death of Lord, spiritually, when he cried out, my God my God why hast thou forsaken me, is over and his physical death is over too. These are simply the inevitable results of the physical death. Now there can be no question, I do not think, that the attendant events of the burial represent the depth of misunderstanding and humiliation to him, personally who was the Son of God and the eternal mediator of God's salvation. When we are buried, we have someone stand in the pulpit and frequently he gives a little talk in which he extols the virtues of the one who has died. I have never really thought that was altogether proper. It's very good I think for Christians to avoid as much of that as possible. That kind of speech always rings a little hollow, particularly before those who know the person who had died.

I heard of a person who gave this long exalting speech in the presence of a body, and finally one of the little boys turned to his mom and said, mom get someone to go up there and look in that casket and see if pop is really there. [laughter]

Now in the case of the Lord Jesus, there was no one to extol him. Even the pallbearers, Joseph and Nicodemus, did not understand what was happening. And there was no funeral sermon, no funeral oration to extol the merits of the Son of God. He was just put in the grave like a son of man, not the Son of man. In fact they were saying, he’s just a man like the rest of us. I have often thought that being buried is a very humiliating thing for anyone, because no matter how a person may speak about the person who has died, it’s impossible for him to speak absolutely truly. And furthermore, we are subject to the exegesis of the preacher who is conducting the funeral.

Now I know that in the case of many of us as, we think about our death and burial in the time when our bodily remains are in a casket and somebody is talking about us, I know that there is going to be some occasion when I am going to want to rise out of that casket and correct some things that are said, [laughter] but we don’t have that opportunity. We are absolutely at the mercy of the individuals who are burying us, and furthermore, a week later, we have become a memory. And as the weeks go by, we become less and less of a factor in human history. It is all a self-humiliation, self-humbling.

The Lord Jesus went through all of that until finally as you looked at him in the grave there is the body of the man, Jesus who as a person is the majestic second person of the triune God. Never has the discrepancy between the majesty of the eternal God and the humiliation of our Lord Jesus in just being a man been more beautifully portrayed than when his body was lying in the grave. There is the Son of man who is the majestic second person of the Trinity. That discrepancy between the majesty of God and the body of the man Jesus is the real significance of the humiliation of our Lord in his burial.

It was also the inception of his exaltation, because God does not permit, there is a limit to the indignities that he permits men to do to the Son of God, and so we read that he was buried in a

new tomb, just as the Jewish men were ready to look forward to the time when his body is taken down from the cross and thrown on the pile of bodies at the potter's field to be buried by someone who would dig a hole in the ground and throw the body in, these two men come forward and one who's had a special tomb hewn out, absolutely new, the kind of thing that would be a tomb for a king.

Incidentally, it was the custom in ancient times when a king visited a city for them to do things for the king that marked out their worship of the king. They would frequently cut a new road into the city in order that the king may go in on the new road in token of their high praise for the king, and something new was always proper when a king visited. For example when the Lord Jesus came into the city, he went carefully through a little ritual to ride on a colt, on the foal of an ass, on which no one had ever yet sat. The Bible says specifically he came in as a king, and it was specifically stated here that he was placed in this new tomb in which no one had ever yet been placed, so men wanted to bury him like a common criminal, but God had him buried like a king.

Furthermore, he was buried in a garden. Well after all, all of our troubles began in a garden, in the Garden of Eden. There the first Adam sinned and died spiritually. It is in a second garden that the Son of man is placed, and from which on Sunday morning there shall come forth the new man, the Lord Jesus, the last Adam and the whole story ultimately finds its conclusion in the garden of God in paradise in which there is a new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem. The garden. A new tomb. God was transforming the activities of men by sovereign providence so that they would ultimately glorify the son. There is a limit to the indignities that men heap upon the Son of God. Please remember that my dear friend. God is ultimately touched, and he will do his sovereign work.

Now finally, our time is coming to an end. I would like to put two statements of Scripture side by side and ask you to reflect upon them for a moment. The two statements are Joseph was a disciples of Jesus “but secretly for fear of the Jews” and the statement that Joseph “went in boldly and craved the body of Jesus.” Here we have Joseph a disciple, but a secret disciple for fear of the Jews, and here we have the same Joseph boldly going in and craving the body of Jesus. Some men are

by nature bold, aggressive, self-assertive—even impudent—we all have known that type of person. It’s commonly said that people rush in where angels fear to tread, and Mr. Spurgeon used to say, “They are fearless because they’re brainless.” [Laughter] A lot of times that’s true.

No one could ever say this of Joseph of Arimathea. He was a man—or Nicodemus—they were men who would come to Jesus by night. They were normally cautious timid men who shattered the bonds of their own cowardly nature, faced themselves, defy what they see and feel in their own hearts, and know to be themselves and triumph eternally. And the question that crowds in upon us and cries for an answer is how did this happen? How did this fearful disciples of the Lord Jesus, who trembled because of the Jewish friends who were in the Sanhedrin, How did he have the nerve to stand out and before Pilate publicly to ask for the body of the Lord Jesus, not only to supervise his burial in the potter’s field, but take that body into his own private grounds and place it in a burial place which he had hewn out for himself, a lovely place, and at the same time defiling his own hands according to their interpretation of the law by putting his hand on a dead body? What’s the touch that breaks the bonds of cowardice and flames the heart with devotion and leads to deeds of everlasting glory?

There’s only one answer. It’s the power, the touch, the spell of the cross. There had been an indication of this in the prophecy of Simeon. He had said to Mary the mother of our Lord, “Behold the child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel, for a sign that shall be spoken against, yea it should pierce of thine own soul also that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” In other words the cross reveals the inmost thoughts of every single individual. You cannot hear the story of the cross without the revelation of what you really are deep down within being brought to its manifestation before God.

Now Joseph, I believe, was almost certainly a spectator at the cross of the Lord Jesus, and in the *Believers Bible Bulletin* I give you some reasons why I think that is true. He was good ground, no question about that. And he came ultimately to the full realization of the events that surrounded the cross. He was a man who had been attracted to the Lord Jesus by the grace and power of his Word,



and a feeble and flickering faith had been planted in his heart by God. He had bowed his heart before the Lord, and he had confessed him as the king of his life. He had believed unto righteousness.

Yet with that feeble and flickering faith, that faith lay hidden in his heart because he was a secret disciple. The Lord's all inspiring miracles his profound and meaningful sermons, his touching selflessness and above all, the pure holiness of his personal life and public life, no doubt helped Joseph to be built up a bit in his faith, but those things were insufficient to bring him to a bold and forthright confession of it before men.

It's not enough to hear the sermons that our Lord preached. It's not enough to see the miracles that he performed. It's not enough to have an idea that he is a pure and holy man. That may bring a person to faith in the Lord Jesus, but evidently it's not enough to bring that iron into the soul that makes a man the kind of disciple that will stand up for our Lord and be counted. The day came, however, when Joseph with Nicodemus, stood below the cross. There they saw in his suffering their guilt. He no doubt reflected as he saw the Lord Jesus hanging that he cannot be hanging here for his own sins; he is the holy king who is to come. He must be here suffering and dying at the hands of wicked men because he's the ancient promised Redeemer.

And the irresistible power and appeal of the crimsoned love of the Lord Jesus gripped this weak disciple with his friend and their little faith snapped its shackles and amidst the shouts of praise from the angelic hosts, it did it's loving and faithful deed in requesting the body of the Lord Jesus. It's almost as if Joseph said within himself, the sun has acknowledged him and covered his face in darkness. The very earth itself has confessed him and shuttered in her heart over his infinite sufferings. If he knew about the rending of the temple veil, he might have said, the temple has acknowledged that he is the end of the law and the beginning of the new age, and then he had determined himself in the light of this I must confess him, too.

As Spurgeon has said, “The cross is a wondrous magnet that draws to Jesus every man of the true metal.” I love that statement. I have used it so many times; I'll probably cite it a hundred

times in the future. I love it. Because it's such a beautiful expression: the cross is a wondrous magnet that draws to itself every man of the true metal. Joseph was a man of the true metal, and the glorious cross of Christ did more for him in a few moments as he reflected upon the blood that was shed there and the loveliness of our Lord's teaching in sacrifice than all of that other ministry that he had previously.

You know, I think this is the reason why the writers of the Synoptic Gospels devote such a disproportionate space to the passion of our Lord in their Gospels. If you'll look at the Gospel of Mark you'll find the greatest section of that Gospel is devoted the last few days of his life on earth. The cross is that significant in their eyes.

Now there were other people who stood around there with Joseph and Nicodemus and they didn't respond that way. They were unmoved. They're hearts were stubborn in their sin. There are people who can hear the story of Jesus Christ and go out just as those men who were standing around the cross. It's just as if they were playing with dice, saying come on seven, come one eleven, while the greatest event in all the universe is taking place right in their presence. You see, the Bible says there are some people who are of God and there are some people who are of the truth. Incidentally it is our Lord himself who says that. There are men who are of God and there are men who are of the truth and there are men who are not of God, and there are men who are not of the truth.

Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning has put it so beautifully: “Earth's crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God, but only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit 'round and pluck blackberries.” I've preached now for many years. There are people who sat through the ministry of the Word of God and the cross of Jesus Christ of great truth, and they are picking blackberries. They don't see what's really happening when our Lord died, they don't see the significance of the crimson love of our Lord in the cross. They just do not comprehend how important it is that the Lord Jesus offered himself up for sacrifice for sinners. They don't see themselves as sinners.

There are multitudes who have never taken that initial step that both Joseph and Nicodemus took when they had responded to the Lord Jesus. They have heard the message, perhaps. What they need of course is the truth of his atoning work. There is none other name unto heaven given by men whereby we must be saved. The lives of Joseph and Nicodemus are a call to them to see the blood and water which flowed from his side and to trust him for life evermore.

But there are others who have believed like Joseph, like Nicodemus. They are in the Christian community. They may be in Believers Chapel. I have the sad feeling that they are in Believers Chapel, but we give him only a half-hearted devotion. We treasure his worth; we love to claim his name; we dislike those who dislike him, but for some love of place, for some love of pleasure, or for some love of position, or perhaps just plain indifference, we have never really surrendered to his will for our lives. And unto the hardened believer, to the enslaved, to the fearful, to the weak, to the indifferent, among the saints, the story of the burial is a call to take one's place by the side of the cross of the Lord Jesus and look up to him hanging there, and then to measure your life, measure your aims, measure your goals, measure your pleasures, measure the things that really keep you from surrendering to the Lord Jesus and having him as the guide of your life. Not in perfection—do not misunderstand me—but a basic commitment that he comes first.

Measure all of the glory of this life against that, and in the light of that wonderful, red love manifested there, determine that he shall not only be my Savior but in the crisis of life I shall stand for him. May God help us for Christians to respond like Joseph and Nicodemus.

If you're here this morning and you have never believed in Christ of course, you need that basic commitment to recognize that you are lost. To see the Lord Jesus as the one who died for sinners, and to flee to him for everlasting life. Don't waste any time. Even a second or two is too long. You can never be sure but the breath that you are drawing right now. He is the God of whose hand thy breath is, the Scriptures say. May God help you to run to him for refuge from the judgment to come. Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee and praise Thee for the wonders of our great God. O God, bring us to the place in our spiritual experience where we, in the position of Joseph and Nicodemus, having rushed into Pilate and audaciously requested the body of our Lord Jesus, giving him first place in our lives.

May grace, mercy and peace go with us.

For Christ’s sake. Amen.