

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
19:38-42

38. And after this Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave *him* permission. He came therefore and took the body of Jesus. 39. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. 40. Then they took the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. 41. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no man had yet been laid. 42. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews' Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby.

38.--[*And...Joseph of Arimathea.*] This verse begins St. John's account of our Lord's burial. The manner of that burial was one of the things predicted by Isaiah (ch. 53:9), in a verse which is not correctly translated. It should be, "His grave was appointed with the wicked; but with the rich man was His tomb." The details of His burial are carefully recorded by all the four Evangelists. Each of them names Joseph as the prime agent in the transaction, and, singularly enough, each mentions something that the other three Gospel writers do not mention. St. Matthew alone says that he was "a rich man" (Matt. 27:51). St. Mark alone says that he was "an honorable counselor, who also waited for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43). St. Luke alone says that he was "a good man and a just" who had "not consented to the counsel and deed of them...who himself waited for the kingdom of God" (Luke 23:50,51). St. John alone says here that he was "a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews." It is another singular fact about Joseph that we never hear a word about him in Scripture except on this occasion of our Lord's burial. Both before and after this interesting event, the Bible, for some wise reason, is entirely silent about him. Nor can we explain how an inhabitant of Arimathea happened to have a new tomb at Jerusalem. We must either suppose that as a rich man he had two residences, or else that though born at Arimathea he had lately removed to Jerusalem. The utmost we know is that the article in the Greek before "Joseph" and before "of Arimathea" seems to indicate that he was a person well known by history to the readers of St. John's Gospel.

About the place Arimathea, from where Joseph came, nothing is known. Some think that it is Ramah, where Samuel dwelt (1 Sam. 7:17). The Septuagint Greek translator certainly calls Ramah "Armathaim," which looks like it. St. Luke calls it a "city of Judea." Nothing certain seems to be known about it.

[*Being a disciple...Jews.*] The Greek word rendered "secretly" is literally "a concealed" disciple--a past participle. The expression teaches the interesting fact that there were Jews who secretly believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and yet had not courage to confess Him before His crucifixion. We are distinctly told in John 12:42 that "many of the chief rulers believed, but did not confess Christ because of the Pharisees." But the

character given of them, that "they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God," is so condemnatory that we may well doubt whether Joseph was one of these. Lack of physical or moral courage was probably the flaw in his character. It is only fair to remember that as "a rich man and a counselor," he had far more to sacrifice and far more opposition to encounter than poor fishermen or publicans would have. His backwardness to confess Christ cannot, of course, be defended. But his case teaches us that there is sometimes more spiritual work going on in men's minds than appears. We must not set down everyone as utterly graceless and godless who is not bold and outspoken at present. We must charitably hope that there are some secret disciples, who at present hold their tongues and say nothing, and yet, like Joseph, will one day come forward and be courageous witnesses for Christ. All is not gold that glitters, and all is not dross that now looks dirty and makes no show. We must be charitable and hope on. His case should also teach us the great power of that mischievous principle, the fear of man. Open sin kills its thousands, but the fear of man its tens of thousands. Let us watch and pray against it. Faith is the grand secret of victory over it. Like Moses, we must ever live as those who "see Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). And to faith must be added the expulsive power of a new principle--the fear of God. "I fear God," said holy Col. Gardiner, "and there is none else that I need fear."

[*Asked Pilate...body of Jesus.*] The conduct of Joseph deserves our praise and admiration, and his name will be held in honor by the Church of Christ in consequence of it as long as the world stands. Whatever Joseph was at first, he shone brightly at last. "The last are first" sometimes. Let us see what he did.

(a) Joseph honored Christ when our Lord's own apostles had forsaken Him. He showed more faith and courage than His nearest and dearest friends.

(b) Joseph honored Christ when it was a dangerous thing to do Him honor. To come forward and avow respect for one condemned as a malefactor, for one cast out by the High Priests and leaders of the Jews, and to say practically "I am Christ's friend," was bold indeed. St. Mark particularly says, "He went in boldly unto Pilate" (Mark 15:43), showing plainly that it was an act of uncommon courage.

(c) Joseph honored Christ when He was a lifeless corpse and, to all appearance, could do nothing for him. It was not when Jesus was doing miracles and preaching wonderful sermons, but when there remained nothing of Him but a dead body that Joseph came forward and asked permission to bury Him.

Why Joseph's fear departed and he acted with such marvelous boldness now is a question that we have no means of settling. But reason points out that in all probability he had been an eyewitness of much that had happened this eventful day. He had possibly stood within a short distance of the cross, seen all that took place, and heard every one of our Lord's seven sayings. The miraculous darkness for three hours and the earthquake must have arrested his attention. Surely it is not presumptuous to conjecture that all this must have had a mighty effect on Joseph's soul, and made him resolve at once to cast fear away and avow himself openly to be one of

Christ's friends. It is almost certain that he must have been near the cross at three o'clock, when our Lord gave up the ghost, or else how could he have known of His death and had time to think of burying Him?

After all it is a deep truth, that circumstances bring out character in an extraordinary way. Just as the developing liquid brings out of the dull grey glass in the photographer's hands a latent image, which you never suspected before, so do circumstances bring out in some men a decision and power of character which before you would have thought impossible.

Rollock remarks: "When Christ was working wonders and speaking as never man spoke, all this did not move Joseph to come forth and show himself. But now with Christ being dead and in shame, he comes out. To what do I ascribe this? I ascribe it to the force that comes from the death of Christ. There was never a living man in the world who had such power as that dead body had. More mighty was His death than His life."

[*And Pilate gave him permission.*] The entire absence of difficulties in Joseph's way is, at first sight, rather remarkable. We may easily believe that Pilate was willing enough to grant Joseph's request. He did not grant it until the centurion certified that Jesus was actually dead and the ends of justice (so called) attained. Then at once he gave permission. It is fair to remember that he had regarded our Lord as guiltless all along, that if left to his own free will he would have released Him. It is probable, moreover, that he was vexed and annoyed at the obstinate pertinacity with which the Jews pressed for our Lord's death against his wish, and that he would be glad enough to pay them off and spite them by gratifying any friends of our Lord. But we must also remember, that to the burial of our Lord's body the Jews themselves had no objection, and had even asked that the death of the criminals might be hastened and the dead bodies out of the way. What they would have done with the body of our Lord if Joseph had not come forward, we cannot certainly tell. Lightfoot says there was a common grave for the bodies of malefactors. In any case, Joseph's request was not likely to meet with objection either from Gentile or Jew. But for all that, we must not forget that it made him a marked man (as a friend of Christ) and utterly ruined his character with Caiaphas and the high priests.

[*He came...body of Jesus.*] The word rendered "took" here is the same that is rendered "took away" just above. Some think, as Tholuck and Ellicott, that the Roman soldiers took the body down from the cross. But I see no certain proof of this, and I think it unlikely they would take the trouble to do it if others were willing to undertake the task. The meaning, in my opinion, is that Joseph came up to the cross, raised and lifted from it the lifeless corpse of our Lord, and took it away for burial. Whether this was done by rearing a ladder against the cross, as Rubens' famous picture represents, and so letting down the body after drawing out the nails, or whether by taking up the cross out of the hole in which it was fixed, laying it on the ground, and then taking out the nails, is a question that we have no means of deciding. To me it seems far more probable that the latter plan would be adopted than the former, and that as the cross was most likely reared up with the body on it, so it was taken down again with the body on it. But every reader must judge for himself.

In whatever way the body was taken down, or taken off the cross, everything seems to me to indicate that Joseph was the person who did it with his own hands. This is the more remarkable when we consider that to touch a dead body made a Jew ceremonially unclean, and that this was the afternoon preceding the passover Sabbath. There seems, however, no reason why we should suppose that no one helped Joseph. He could hardly lift the cross, or reverently lift off the body of a full-grown person in the prime of life, without some aid. Why should we hesitate to believe that John and Nicodemus helped him?

It is a curious coincidence, though perhaps only a coincidence, that it was a "Joseph" who probably first touched and received our Lord's body when He was born into the world at Bethlehem, and again a "Joseph" who was the last to hold, lift, and handle the dead body of the same Lord when He was buried.

39.--[*And Nicodemus...also came.*] The fact here recorded is quite peculiar to St. John's Gospel. For wise reasons, neither Matthew, Mark, nor Luke ever mention the name of Nicodemus. John mentions him three times--first, as a secret inquirer (John 3:1), secondly, as a timid advocate of justice toward our Lord in the Jewish Council (John 7:10), and lastly, in this place. Both here and on the second occasion he emphatically inserts the explanatory comment that it was the same Nicodemus who "at first came to Jesus by night."

The verse before us seems to show that Nicodemus came forward as a volunteer and helped to bury our Lord, and did not shrink to take part with Joseph in his good work. I can hardly think that he went with Joseph to Pilate. There is not a word to show this in any of the four Gospels.

Some think that by agreement Nicodemus went to fetch the hundred pounds' weight of spice (no slight burden to carry), while Joseph went to Pilate.

I should rather conjecture that when Nicodemus saw Joseph (whom doubtless as a Pharisee and counselor he knew well) coming boldly forward and showing anxiety to honor our Lord's body, Nicodemus' own heart was stirred within him, his own timidity fell to the ground, and he came forward and offered to aid. In so doing he deserves praise and honor, though in a lower degree, like Joseph. Nicodemus showed more reverence and love to our Lord when He was dead than he had ever done when He was alive. Once more we see that circumstances bring out character in very unexpected ways. The man who began seeking Jesus by night at last confesses Jesus openly before the world in the full light of day.

The case of Nicodemus is deeply instructive. It shows us how small and weak the beginning of true religion may be in the soul of man. It shows us that we must not despair of anyone because he begins with a little timid, secret inquiry after Christ. It shows us that there are wide differences and varieties in the characters of believers. Some are brought into full light at once and take up the cross without delay. Others attain light very slowly and halt long between two opinions. It shows us that those who make the least display at first sometimes shine brightest and come out best

at last. Nicodemus confessed his love to Christ when Peter, James, and Andrew had all run away. What need we have for patience and charity in forming an estimate of other people's religion! There are more successors of Nicodemus in the Church of Christ than we are aware of. We may see some marvelous changes in some persons if we live with them a few years. The strongest, hardiest trees are often the slowest in growth. He who sets down men and women as graceless and godless, if they do not profess full assurance of hope the first day they take up religion and hear the Gospel, forgets the case of Nicodemus, and exhibits his own ignorance of the ways of the Spirit. All God's elect are led to Christ, undoubtedly, but not all at the same speed or through the same experience.

On the conduct of Joseph and Nicodemus, Calvin remarks: "Here we have a striking proof that Christ's death was more quickening than His life. So great was the efficacy of that sweet savor which the death of Christ conveyed to the minds of these two men that it quickly extinguished all the passions of the flesh."

Quesnel observes: "Wonderful is the power of Christ's death, which gives courage to confess Him in His deepest humiliation, to those who, when He was doing miracles, came to Him only in secret."

Henry observes that Joseph and Nicodemus showed weak faith but strong love. "A firm faith in Christ's resurrection would have saved them this cost and expense. But they showed their deep love to our Lord's person and teaching."

[*Bringing a mixture...hundred pounds.*] The mixture here mentioned was probably in the shape of powder. The two ingredients were strongly aromatic and antiseptic. The large quantity brought shows the wealth and the liberal mind of Nicodemus. It also shows his wise forethought. A dead body so torn and lacerated as that of our blessed Lord would need an unusually large quantity of antiseptics or preservatives to check the tendency to corruption, which such a climate would cause even at Easter. Considering also that everything must have been done with some haste, the large quantity of spices used was probably meant to compensate for the lack of time to do the work slowly and carefully.

40.--[*Then they took...wound it...spices.*] Here we are told the precise manner of the preparation of our Lord's body for burial. As always in that time and country, He was not put into a coffin. He was simply wrapped up in linen cloths on which the preparation of myrrh and aloes had been laid. Thus the powder would be next to our Lord's body and interpose between the linen and His skin. How the linen cloths were provided we are told by St. Mark: Joseph "bought fine linen" (Mark 15:46). Joseph, being a rich man, had no difficulty in supplying funds for this purpose.

The word "wound" means literally "bound."

The sentence before us supplies one more strong evidence of the reality of Christ's death. Joseph and Nicodemus could not possibly be deceived. When they touched and handled the body, and wrapped it in linen cloths, they must have felt convinced that the heart had ceased to beat and that life

was extinct. There is no mistaking the feel of a dead body.

[*As the custom...bury.*] This is one of those occasional comments or explanatory remarks, which St. John sometimes makes in his Gospel, supplying strong internal evidence that he wrote for all the Church of Christ in every land, Gentiles as well as Jews, and that he thought it wise to explain Jewish customs. The reference appears to be to the wrapping of the body in linen, rather than to the use of the spices. Lazarus at Bethany came out of the grave wrapped around with cloths.

The wise foresight of the Spirit of God appears strongly in the details here given of our Lord's burial. The quantity of spices used was so great that it anticipates the objection that our Lord's body might possibly "see corruption" in some degree before His resurrection. At the same time, the special mention of Joseph being a rich and Nicodemus a ruler helping him, completely stops the mouths of those who would have said that the followers of our Lord could never have found means to prevent the wounds of His body corrupting. By God's superintending providence, inclining rich men to come forward, the difficulty was obviated and the means provided.

Besser says: "Twice was Jesus Christ rich in the days of His poverty. Once, immediately after His birth, when the wise men from the East offered Him gold and frankincense and myrrh; and now, after His ignominious death, when a rich man buries him and a distinguished man provides spices to anoint Him. Yes, a rich Joseph has taken the place of that poor Joseph who stood by the manger."

41.--[*Now in the place...was a garden.*] This verse tells us the place where our Lord was buried. It was in a garden close to the spot called Golgotha, where He was crucified. This fact alone seems to dispose of the theory that the "place of a skull" meant a place where the skeletons and bones of executed criminals were lying about! Reason and common sense point out that even if there were no argument against the theory from the Jewish customs about bones, it is very unlikely that a garden would have been near such a loathsome place. Golgotha could hardly be a place of execution or a place where criminals were frequently crucified if there was a garden near! The pictures that commonly represent the scene of the crucifixion as a bleak, desolate-looking rocky hill are manifestly quite incorrect. It was a place near to which, or where, "there was a garden."

The curious coincidence that the fall of the first Adam and the agony, the cross, and the sepulchre of the second Adam were all alike connected with a garden, can hardly fail to strike a reflecting mind.

[*And in the garden...laid.*] Here we have the very receptacle described in which our Lord's sacred body was laid. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us it was "hewn out of a rock," the limestone rock, which is the rock of the place. John tells us that it was new, and like St. Luke, adds that "no man had yet been laid" in it.

It is curious that Matthew alone tells us that this tomb was Joseph's own, "which he had hewn out of a rock" (Matt. 27:60). Theophylact remarks that it is a striking proof of our Lord's poverty, that while He lived He had no

house of His own, and when He died He was buried in another's tomb.

It is almost needless to say that both conditions of the sepulchre above mentioned are of great importance and deserve careful notice. (a) Our Lord's tomb was hewn out of a hard limestone rock. This made it clearly impossible for anyone to say that the disciples made a subterraneous entrance into the tomb by night and stole the body away. By the entrance that it was carried into the sepulchre, by the same it must be carried out. (b) Our Lord's tomb was a new one in which no one had ever been laid. This made it impossible for anyone to say, after the resurrection, that there was no proof that Jesus rose from the dead and that it might possibly be someone else. This could not be, when His body was the first and only body that was ever laid in this grave. Wonderful is it to see how at every turn the overruling wisdom of God has stopped, obviated, and frustrated by wise provisions the objections of infidels.

42.--[*So there they laid Jesus, etc.*] In order to see the full meaning of this verse, we should slightly invert the order of the words and paraphrase them in some such way as this: "In this new rock-hewn tomb, therefore, Joseph and Nicodemus laid the body of Jesus, because it was conveniently nigh at hand and because the Jews' preparation day, or day preceding the passover sabbath, left them little time and made it necessary to hasten their proceedings." We may well believe that these two holy men had but little time when we consider that our Lord did not give up the ghost till three o'clock; that the day ended at six and only three hours were left for (1) Joseph to go to Pilate and get permission to remove the body from the cross, (2) for Joseph and Nicodemus to take the nails out and lift the body from the tree, (3) for wrapping the body in linen with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, and (4) for finally carrying it to the tomb and rolling a huge stone to the mouth of the tomb. When we remember, besides this, that the body of a full grown man wrapped in linen with a hundred pounds of additional weight in myrrh and aloes would be a most awkward and difficult burden for two men to carry, we may well believe that nothing but severe exertion could have enabled Joseph and Nicodemus to finish their labor of love before six o'clock. The wonder is that they managed to do it at all. It certainly could not have been done if they had not got a sepulchre nigh at hand. Again the Holy Ghost appears to me to foresee the objection that there was not time to bury our Lord, and mercifully supplies the words that answer it: "the sepulchre was nigh at hand." Even then we can hardly doubt that John and the women from Galilee must have lent some help. At all events, it is distinctly recorded that the women were present, and that they were sitting by and beheld where the body was laid.

Thus ended the most wonderful funeral the sun ever shone upon. Such a death and such a burial--so little understood by man and so important in the sight of God--there never was and never can be again. Who need doubt the love of Christ when we consider the deep humiliation that Christ went through for our sakes! To tabernacle in our flesh at all, to die after the manner of a man, to allow his holy body to hang naked on a cross, to suffer it to be lifted, handled, carried like a lump of cold clay and shut up in a dark, silent, solitary tomb--this was indeed love that passes knowledge. What true believer need fear the grave now? Solemn as is the thought of our last narrow bed, we must never forget that "it is the place where the

Lord lay" (Matt. 28:6). "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:56).

Henry observes: "Christ's death should comfort us against the fear of death. The grave could not long keep Christ, and it shall not long keep us. It was a loathsome prison before, it is a perfumed bed now. He whose Head is in heaven need not fear to put his feet into the grave."

Every Bible reader knows that Isaiah's famous prophecy contains the words, "He made His grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death" (Isa. 53:9). But not everyone knows the interesting fact that the more correct translation of the Hebrew words would be, "His grave was appointed to be with the wicked; but with the rich man was His tomb." This is the opinion of such eminent scholars as Capellus, Vitranga, Bishop Lowth, and Bishop Horsley.