

The Burial of Jesus in the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea

Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-54; John 19:31-42

Friday afternoon, about 4 pm on the fifteenth of Nisan

DIG: Some say Christ did not really die, but was revived in the tomb. How does John 19:1, 18, 32-34 and 40 argue against this idea? In asking for the body of Jesus, what risks is Joseph taking with Pilate and the Sanhedrin? What risks did Nicodemus take as well? Why would both of them risk their reputations and status at this point?

REFLECT: What is the riskiest thing you have ever done because of your faith in Yeshua Messiah? Why did you do it? Jesus had apparently failed, but Joseph, Nicodemus and the women did not abandon the Master. What do you learn from this lesson for your life? How does your fear of others and your love for Yeshua sometimes conflict? What will you do this week to demonstrate your love for Jesus?

Now the race was on. And already evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, and Shabbat was about to begin at sundown. Israel was supposed to welcome the Sabbath as a bride. So as Queen Sabbath approached, her coming would be announced by three blasts from the priests' trumpets from the highest pinnacle of the Temple about 3:00 in the afternoon.¹⁶³² It was to be a special Sabbath, or a high Sabbath because it was also the second day of Pesach (Mark 15:42a; Luke 23:54; John 19:31a). Mark explained this to his non-Jewish readers.

If they could, the Roman soldiers left the corpse on the cross to either rot or be devoured by predatory animals. However, the Romans often tried to cooperate with their conquered peoples by allowing them to follow their own local customs as much as possible. In this case, Jewish tradition dictated that any dead body, even a criminal, could not be left out in the open overnight (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Roman law allowed the family of the condemned to take the body for burial, after obtaining permission from a Roman judge. Since no one was intended to survive crucifixion, the body was not released to the family until the soldiers were sure the victim was dead. By custom, one of the Roman guards would pierce the body with a spear. Traditionally, this had been considered a wound to the heart through the right side of the chest - a fatal wound probably taught to most Roman soldiers. The standard infantry spear, which was 5 to 6 feet long could have easily reached the chest of a man crucified on the customary low Tau cross.¹⁶³³

The centurion noticed a man - one who was dressed as a wealthy person - walking rapidly toward the Garden Gate. The Roman did not know him but had seen him in the last hour standing apart from the others, watching Jesus' face with obvious compassion. This was Joseph of Arimathea. The centurion also saw that two of Pilate's guards conversing with the high priests. He wondered about this and returned to his post.

Stage 27 - The Breaking of the Bones and the Piercing of Christ: Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken to speed up the death process so that the bodies could be taken down (Yochanan 19:31b). Once the Sabbath started no Jew could touch their bodies or they would be ceremonially unclean.

The guards came across the Golgotha and told the centurion that Caiaphas had been to see Pilate. They had told him that once the Sabbath started no Jew could touch their bodies or they would be ceremonially unclean. The procurator had been in a mood to be done with the whole matter of this Nazarene. He had called two guards and had told them to accompany the priests back to Golgotha and there put an end to it at once.

The centurion nodded toward the three crosses and ordered the guards to do their duty. One of the soldiers was armed with a spear. The other carried a big plank of wood, about one inch by three inches and about four feet long. The soldiers got to work. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Yeshua so he could not push up and breathe, and then those of the other. When the second criminal sank to the bottom of his cross and showed no sign of trying to pull himself up again, the two soldiers moved on to Christ.

But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water (John 19:32-34). Traditionally, it has been assumed that the Lord's right side was pierced because the large flow of blood would be more likely from the perforation of the distended and thin-walled right atrium or ventricle, than the thick-walled and contracted left ventricle. Some skeptics bring up the difficulty in explaining, with medical accuracy, the flow of both blood and water. However, in the ancient Greek, the word order does not matter. In fact, the words generally denoted importance, not sequence. So it seems that John emphasized the prominence of blood rather than the blood coming before the water. The water probably represented pleural and pericardial fluid and would have preceded the flow of blood, and would have been smaller in volume than the blood.

John was a witness to all of this. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says: They will look on the one they have pierced (Yochanan 19:35-37).

Stage 28 - A Request for Jesus' Body Was Made: Now at the last drop of daylight, as evening approached, there came a rich man named Joseph from the Judean town of Arimathea. This fulfilled the prophecy from Isaiah, when the prophet said: In His death He was with a rich man (Isaiah 53:9b CJB). He was a member of the Great Sanhedrin (see Lg - [The Great Sanhedrin](#)), who was a good and upright man, waiting for the kingdom of God. But more importantly, he was a disciple of Jesus who did not agree with the Sanhedrin's decision to crucify his Savior, but objected secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders (Matthew 27:57; Mark 15:42b and 43:a; Luke 23:50-51; John 19:38a). This proves that there was even disagreement among even the top rabbis.

Later, after Christ had died, because of his status Joseph of Arimathea went boldly to Pilate and asked him for the body of Messiah (Mattityahu 27:58a; Mark 15:43b; Luke 23:52). This required a degree of courage to do what Joseph did that afternoon. He hurried to Fortress Antonia and requested an audience with Pontius Pilate and asked for permission to bury Jesus of Nazareth at once.

Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead because it usually took two or three days to die on the cross. In fact, some victims died of starvation rather than their wounds. The Greek words for he was already dead, are in the perfect tense, indicating a past, completed action, with continuing, and in this case, permanent results. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, Pilate gave the corpse to Joseph (Mattityahu 27:58b; Mark 15:44-45; John 19:38b), not out of any feeling of generosity, but because he could get rid of his most inconvenient and troublesome affair.

Most who witnessed Messiah's crucifixion from a distance have left the dreadful scene. Mary, the Lord's mother, and Mary Magdalene are among those who remain. In addition, Nicodemus, by the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night (see Bv - [Jesus Teaches Nicodemus](#)), accompanied Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:39a). Joseph was a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin, and a secret disciple of Christ. He was one of the few dissenting voices during the sham of a trial. Another one of those voices was Nicodemus the Pharisee.

It is an almost melodramatic irony that, when **Jesus died**, His burial was arranged - not by **Peter**, or **John**, or the others who, only that previous night, had beat **their** chests at Pesach and argued about who loved **the Master** the most - but by a Sadducee (**Joseph of Arimathea**), a Pharisee (**Nicodemus**) and a Gentile pagan (**Pontius Pilate**).

Although **Joseph** and **Nicodemus** had hidden **their** devotion to **the Messiah** throughout His life, now, in His death, they were bringing down on **themselves** the condemnation of **their** peers for the rest of **their** lives. The elite of Jerusalem could never forgive these **men** for assisting a **scoundrel** who had been crucified.

It was **Nicodemus** who sent a servant to his home for **about seventy-five pounds of spices**, a mixture of **myrrh and aloes** - which were necessary for the final anointment of the body. **Joseph** purchased **wide bands** of fine **linen** to be used as funeral clothes.¹⁶³⁴

Stage 29 - The Removal of the Body from the Cross: The soldiers then went about their job of taking **Jesus' body** down off of the cross. This was crucifixion in reverse. Once again, **Yeshua** was laid flat. **Joseph of Arimathea** and **Nicodemus** then wrapped the Lord's body with the spices, in strips of clean linen cloth. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs (**Matthew 27:59; Mark 15:46a; Luke 23:53a; Yochanan 19:40**). The picture may be completed by comparing what is said of Lazarus in **John 11:44**, and the account of the grace clothes in **John 20:7**. The hands and feet were bound with **strips of linen**, and the face covered with a **face cloth**.

This is a summary of the extremely elaborate details of traditional burial in first-century Isra'el. The Torah simply states that we all came from **dust** and, therefore, should **return to dust**. **By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return (Genesis 3:19)**. The implication is that the body must not be altered, and burial should be in the earth. In a traditional Jewish burial even to this day, the body is clothed with a white robe or shroud called *the takhrikhim*. It is significant that the garment has no pockets, illustrating the reality that we can take nothing with us from this life!¹⁶³⁵

Somewhat shockingly, both **Joseph** and **Nicodemus** publicly declared **their** faith in **Christ**. In fact, **Joseph** took **Jesus' body** to his own private family **tomb**, a brand-new manmade cave carved out of the soft **Jerusalem rock** in a **garden** nearby. **The rabbis taught that a criminal's presence in a tomb would desecrate it**. The few Sadducees who were watching from the wall of **Tziyon** were shocked to the point of momentary muteness when they saw **Joseph** and **Nicodemus** touch this blasphemer. When they realized that **the Nazarene**

would be buried in **Joseph's own tomb**, they muttered against them and hurried to confer with **Annas**. The three **Marys** expressed a desire to send someone into **the City** to buy rare **spices** and perfumes. It was the custom for women to do this. The men wanted to agree, but there was no time for the normal ritual washing and anointing of the corpse with oil. They pointed out that **Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds (John 19:39b)**, but the women were not impressed. They had offered nothing but tears. They too wanted to be a part of the last loving-kindness. **John** suggested that they could return tomorrow on Sunday with perfumes.

However, **John** insisted that **he** should perform the final act of loving-kindness for **his Meshiach**. Mary could be left with the other women. **He** was ashamed that the other apostles were not present. As **the Master** had prophesied, they had scattered like sheep when **the Shepherd** was stricken. It grieved **Yochanan** to think that **his** beloved friend might still be in the hands of strangers in these final hours. **He** said that **he** would help **Joseph** and **Nicodemus**. **He** insisted on it. Who better to lay loving hands on the body than the one to whom **the Savior** had entrusted **His** mother?

The three **men** proceeded with **their** urgent work. Mary, the mother of **Jesus**, could not be persuaded to turn away. When she started to weep again **John** left **the body** and hurried to Mary's side. Softly pleading, **he** reminded her that her **Son** said the **His** death was not a defeat, but a glorious victory. But as he talked, **Yochanan** also began to weep.

Hastily, the three men washed **the body** as best they could. Two had to hold **the body** on its side while the third washed the back, from the bloody head down to the pierced heels. **Nicodemus** unrolled some **linen** sheeting and placed it on the ground beside **the body**. The three **men** lifted **Yeshua**, and set **the corpse on the linen**. The little party of women remained near the gate. There was no one else.

Stage 30 - Jesus is Laid in the Tomb: When this was completed, the **men** carried it slowly and tenderly about 120 feet north-northwest to the middle of the low **garden**. In the **tomb**, **the body** was laid on a slab of stone. Swiftly, **they** arranged **the body** so that it appeared to be in proper repose. **Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and the Sabbath was about to begin, they laid Jesus there since the tomb was nearby. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden there was a new tomb, or cave, cut out of the rock, in which no one had ever been laid (Matthew 27:60a; Mark 15:46b; Luke 23:53b-54; John 19:41-42).** Burial space close to **Tziyon** was always in high demand, but a rich man like **Joseph** could afford such an expensive **tomb**.

A large white **linen cloth** was fitted down over **the body** and the three **men** cut it a few inches beyond the tips of the toes. Narrow **strips** - or bandages - were cut from the remainder. The big shroud was tied with these bandages, at the neck, at the waist, and around both ankles. The upper part of the shroud covered the head, but the bandage around the neck enabled anyone at any time to flick the head covering off to identify the body. In the first week or two after burial, the **cloth** was usually turned down from the head to expose it. The bandage around the waist was to keep the hands from slipping from the body. The third one was to prevent the ankles from separating.¹⁶³⁶

Jesus was **born** in a cave and wrapped in burial **cloth** (see **Aq - The Birth of Jesus**), and when **He died**, **He** was buried in a cave and wrapped in burial **cloth**. This was no accident. These two incidents are like book ends to **His** life. The story written in between is the most remarkable ever told.

There are two important theological points regarding **His** burial. First, it marked the end of **His** humiliation. This was death of the **God-man**. None of those who are close to **Him** are involved in the burial - only two secret disciples. Secondly, it marks the beginning of **His** exaltation. **He** was not buried in a common grave (which would normally have been the case because **He** died a criminals death), but **He** was buried in a new and **rich** man's **tomb**. Also it is important to note that **the tomb** was inside **a garden**. In one **garden**, the first Adam brought death; but in the another **garden**, the **Last Adam** brought life (**First Cor 15:45-49**).¹⁶³⁷

Then, consistent with the first-century tradition, **Joseph of Arimathea** rolled a **big stone** in front of the entrance of the tomb and went away (**Mattityahu 27:60b; Mark 15:46c**). The entrance was less than five feet high and was closed by a millstone sixty inches in diameter and nine inches thick. The weight of this stone was beyond the strength of one man to move. It sat in a curved groove and, when two or more men tried to rock it away from the entrance, another man had to crouch below with a heavy stone to use as a wedge. Whether it was rolled to the left or to the right of the entrance, the groove turned upward. This is an indisputable evidence for the resurrection. The fact that a specific man, **Joseph of Arimathea**, is mentioned as the owner of the tomb is a detail that gives credence to the entire burial account (**First Corinthians 15:3-5**). With sagging shoulders and a heart of lead, **Joseph** retreated into the night. The sound of **his** footsteps grew fainter in the distance, along with the glow from his lantern, until all was still and dark.

Jesus had previously said: **For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a whale** (see my commentary on **Jonah At - Jonah's Prayer**), **so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth** (see **Eo - The Sign of Jonah**). Jesus was in **the tomb** for three days, and during that time **He** went and preached to the spirits in Sheol (see my commentary on **Genesis Cb - But Noah Found Grace in the Eyes of the LORD**). If **He** died on **Friday** afternoon and rose Sunday morning, how could that be three days? It is critical to understand two important facts: First, the Jewish way of calculating time is quite different than the Gentiles. The Jewish day begins at sundown, not midnight; therefore, the Jewish night always precedes the day. Secondly, it is also necessary to know that any part of a day is counted as a whole day.

All of the Gospel accounts concerning the time of **His** death and burial use typical Jewish terminology. For example, the Gospels state more than once that **the Messiah** died on **preparation day** (**Mattityahu 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54**), or the **day of preparation** (**Yochanan 19:42**). **This is standard Jewish language found in all rabbinic literature, and it always means the sixth day of the week, or Friday.** The Gospels also state several times that **the Lord** was buried just before **the Sabbath** began. Such statements, when not qualified, always refer to **Friday**.

We know that the first night of the Passover occurred Thursday after sundown, or to the Jewish way of calculating time, the beginning of **Friday** because the night precedes the day. Using the Jewish way of calculating part of a day as a whole day, then, we know that: **Messiah** was in **the tomb** part of **Friday** before sundown. Because the Jewish day begins at sundown, that counts as an entire day (day 1); **He** was also in **the tomb** all of Saturday (day 2), and part of Sunday, counting as a complete day (day 3). The phrase **three days and three nights** does not require three twenty-four hour periods. Consequently, **the supreme Commander of life and death** arose after **three days**.¹⁶³⁸