

John 19:31-42

The battered and torn body of Jesus hung on the cross. He had breathed His last breath. His followers could not believe it. Life seemed defeated. How could the Creator be dead? Did this mean evil had triumphed, and that God had lost the cosmic battle with Lucifer (Ephesians 6:12)? Were all the forces of darkness rejoicing? Had the promises of God failed? It seemed as if all hope was lost. Did they dare to imagine His promise to rise from death would possibly come to pass? Looking at that mutilated body hanging there lifeless, knowing His spirit was now in the Father's hands, who would dare to cling to that hope (2 Samuel 14:14a)?

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.

31 Bodies left on a tree during the Sabbath were said to defile the land (Deuteronomy 21:22,23). They did not want the cries of suffering fellow Jews to mar the special Sabbath. Breaking their legs would cause the crucified to quickly suffocate. Then they could be thrown on Gehenna, Jerusalem's trash heap, out of sight and out of mind.

Consider again the irony. They want to finish off the Son of God so they can worship God. They want to celebrate the feast, which is a picture of the redemption in Jesus, so they must get Him off the instrument of torture. They want the Redeemer out of sight so they can remember their redemption from Egypt. They do not want the land to be defiled by leaving a body on the tree, so they want to throw their Creator's body to the vultures waiting in the city dump. They want to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a picture of examining our heart and removing sin from our lives, while they committed the sin of the ages. There is a similarity with every "religious" person who rejects a personal relationship with Jesus. It is ritual over substance, appearance over reality, honoring man's opinion over God's! It is evil (Mark 7:6)!

"Quick, get Him out of your conscience so you can celebrate this ritual. Do not get quiet and listen to His Spirit speak to your heart. He might interrupt your Bible study time. Just zone out while you are at church, His Word might speak to your heart and actually ask you to do something about your supposed faith." You see, these Jewish leaders were not so different from us when our pride allows a religious spirit that would steal our relationship with Christ (Isaiah 29:13).

³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him.

32 A sharp blow from a metal mallet was all it took to break the legs between the ankle and the knee. Unable to push themselves up to breathe, the crucified quickly succumbed to asphyxiation.

33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.

33,34 Jesus had already surrendered His spirit into the hands of His Father (Luke 23:46). Nevertheless, the soldiers could not take the chance that He might be still alive. They would suffer the same sentence of any who escaped their custody. It was easier to simply thrust the spear into His heart to be certain. The Roman spear was a six-foot long shaft of light wood with an iron spearhead. One thrust and out poured the serum that had built up in the pericardium sack with blood in the chambers of the heart (1 John 5:6-8).

35 He who saw it has borne witness--his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth--that you also may believe.

35 John was standing there. He is declaring that he personally witnessed this. Jesus did not swoon. He did not take a drug that made Him appear to be dead. No one survives a lacerated heart. The blood and water tell us that all the theories that claim His physical body did not die on the cross are nonsense. We have an eyewitness. He recorded this so that you may believe!

36 For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken."

36 John continues to remind us that this is all according to the words of the prophets. It was no coincidence that the Romans did not need to break Jesus' bones. It was the fulfillment of a prophecy from Psalm 34:20. It is especially significant to the Jews because the Passover Lamb they had just eaten was not to have any of its bones broken (Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:12). Jesus was declared by John the Baptist to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

37 And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced."

37 Over four hundred years earlier, Zechariah wrote of a time to come when the Jews would look on the One they pierced and mourn as one mourns for the loss of their only child (Zechariah 12:10). John saw this piercing by a Roman spear as a prerequisite for that prophecy to be fulfilled. Again, it was not a coincidence but happened according to the Word of the Lord. The God who dwells outside of time could speak those words to David and Zechariah hundreds of years before they happened so that we would believe. It is my understanding that when Christ returns, the Jewish people who survive the time called "Jacob's Trouble" will again look on Him whom they have pierced and mourn in an even more profound way as they accept Him as their Messiah (Romans 11:26,27).

38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was 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. So he came and took away his body.

38 To avoid the body of Jesus going on the trash heap, the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate to ask permission to take the body. This must have been surprising to Pilate that a member of the Sanhedrin wanted to honor the body of a man his colleagues thought was a blasphemer.

39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.

39 You will recall Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John chapter three when Nicodemus said they knew Jesus was from God because no one could do those kinds of miracles if they were not from God (John 3:2). Jesus told him that he needed to be born again and told him that the Son of Man would be lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14,15). Nicodemus watched Jesus' words come to pass and it may have been at that moment that he remembered and was born again.

Nicodemus had spent a great deal on those spices. Apparently, he and Joseph had gotten together and decided that they were going to defect. They saw the contrast between Jesus and Caiaphas. They knew the murder of Jesus was motivated by envy and financial gain (Mark 15:10). Even though they held positions in their government that would be comparable to a Senator, they decided they would walk away from that prestige and follow the crucified man from Galilee. This was their "coming out of the closet" so to speak. They had been secret followers to this point, but now they felt compelled to declare where their allegiance belonged (Mark 8:38).

Think about how hard a decision this must have been. To follow Jesus when He was alive was one thing, but to declare allegiance to a crucified Messiah would seem senseless. Yet, they could no longer stay silent. What was it that changed them from secret followers to outright disciples? Was it the dignity in which Jesus confronted Annas and Caiaphas? Was it Jesus' warning that they would see Him at the right hand of the Father and coming in the clouds of heaven (Matthew 26:64)? Or perhaps it was the way He endured the cross, or the three hours of darkness, or perhaps it was the earthquake (Matthew 27:51). Ultimately, it was the grace of God working in their hearts (John 6:44).

It is a temptation to be a silent follower today as well. You can hang on to your social dignity a little longer if you do not announce your allegiance to Jesus of the Bible. As soon as you say you are a follower of Jesus, born-again, a Bible believing Christian, you can see the attitudes of people toward you change. Imagine making that declaration in Iran or North Korea! For Joseph and Nicodemus, it was not a declaration in word, but in action. They were going to do something that not only said they were followers of Jesus, but that showed they rejected their nation's spiritual leaders. They would even lose the privilege of participating in the rest of the feast, because touching Jesus' dead body meant they were considered ritually unclean (Numbers 19:11).

Did they understand they were touching God's sacrificial Lamb, which was the reality of what the feast portrayed? Did they see that as they prepared to search their hearts during the Feast of Unleavened bread that there was the sin of silence that needed to be swept from their lives? They were the only two out of seventy Jewish leaders to make that stand. The gate is narrow that leads to life (Matthew 7:13).

⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

40 I wondered if this may have disproved the Shroud of Turin as it mentions strips of linen (*othonion*), but on further research I found it does not. The body was first placed in a folded sheet (*sindon*) like the Shroud and then wrapped with spices in the strips of linen. That was the burial custom of the Jews in the first century. (A burial shroud was discovered in a tomb in the Hinnom Valley intact 2000 years after it was placed in that tomb. It was a different weave and design than the Turin Shroud. There was a separate portion for the body and one for the head as John describes later in this Gospel.)

⁴¹ Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.

41 It is an important point that Jesus was placed in a new, unused tomb. Jews never mixed things such as different materials in their clothing (Leviticus 19:19). It was a reminder to remain unmixed with the pagan practices of the world. A tomb was only for one family. By putting Jesus in that tomb, Joseph was giving it to the family of Jesus (Matthew 27:59,60). He would have to build another for his own family. Tombs were very expensive to build as they were so labor intensive to hand hew them in limestone. It was worth much more than today's family burial plot. This was an extravagant gift and is a sign of how completely Joseph had dedicated himself to Jesus. But perhaps Jesus may have asked Joseph, "Hey Joe, Can I borrow your tomb? It will only be for a few days!"

This also fulfilled Scripture. In the suffering servant song of Isaiah chapter 53, it is foretold that the Messiah will make His grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death (Isaiah 53:9). He did indeed die between two wicked men and yet contrary to what would normally have happened, he was buried in a rich man's tomb. How many details of prophecy have we seen fulfilled on that sad afternoon? It should be enough to convince any skeptic.

⁴² So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

42 It was important to get the body into the tomb before the Sabbath began. At the sight of the first two stars, the Passover Sabbath would have begun, and no work would be allowed. Nothing of any weight could be carried. They had to use a tomb nearby to get the body in, clean and wrap it with the spices before those first two stars appeared and the shofar announced the beginning of Sabbath.

There has always been a desperate need for Christians to come out of the closet and be honest about their faith regardless of the cost. How else will others hear (Romans 10:14)? Most unbelievers will not walk through the doors of a church. They must see it in loving action in our lives. They must hear it in honest conversations about what really matters to us. Two thousand years ago these two men took a stand, and we are still talking about it to this day. Ask yourself what you need to do to move beyond being a secret Christian. Take the first step. The next ones are easier. Watch for those opportunities in conversations to declare what Jesus has done for you.

The day Jesus died, Nicodemus and Joseph both decided they would compromise no longer. They could not betray Jesus by being silent! Let me remind you that you understand better than they did what happened that day. Will you put your entire life on the altar (Romans 6:13)? Will you take a stand? Will you come out of the closet with your faith in the One who died for you?

Questions:

Why were they anxious to get the bodies off the crosses? Irony?

Why was Jesus pierced with a spear?

How had Jesus predicted this to Nicodemus?

Why did the two men come out of the closet?

What was the price for doing so?

Why is silence a temptation today?