

Exegesis

Vs. 38 – Considering that Jesus would soon rise from the dead, it is essential to know where his body was buried. So, John tells us, "And after this Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus." As mentioned before, the Romans often left the crucified to rot and be devoured by scavengers. However, in Jerusalem, the Jews prohibited such indignity, even for convicted criminals, burying the dead in a "common grave reserved for that purpose."¹ So it would not have surprised Pilate that "Joseph of Arimathea"² requested Jesus' body or that the Roman governor, despite being antagonistic towards the Jews, "gave him leave." Nor would it have surprised John's readership that "a *disciple* [emphasis added] of Jesus," wanted the body. It was common for disciples to take care of the funeral arrangements for their master.³

What is surprising is that, according to Mark, Joseph of Arimathea was "an honorable counsellor"—i.e., a member of the Sanhedrin (Mar. 15:43). This man was a part of the very group responsible for crucifying Jesus. However, according to Luke, Joseph "had not consented to the counsel and deed" of the others who wanted to crucify Jesus (Lu. 23:50). Though a member of the Sanhedrin, he didn't agree with the majority. But the most surprising aspect about Joseph was that though he was *secretive* about his devotion to Jesus before (cf. 12:42-43), now he is officially requesting custody of the Lord's body so that he might bury him "in his own new tomb" (Matt. 27:60). Such an act would've taken no small degree of courage (cf. Mar. 15:43) as it would've made Joseph's loyalties explicit to all.⁴ To not only *personally* take ownership of Jesus' body but also to bury that same man in one's own tomb told everyone that Joseph had a *personal* connection to the Lord. As Carson explains, "Joseph's act doubtless made him a pariah in some quarters of the Sanhedrin; it was doubly courageous since the charge under which Jesus had been executed was sedition."⁵ Thus, Jesus' body wasn't handed over to one of the apostles or even to Mary but into the hands of a coward turned courageous.

¹ Keener (2003), 2:1157.

² Youngblood, Ronald F., *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, New and Enhanced Edition, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson, 2014), p. 101, Arimathea (*heb.* "heights"), also called "Ramah" (cf. 1 Sam. 1:1, 19), was a town situated in the hill country 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

³ Köstenberger (2008), p. 554.

⁴ Kruse (2017), p. 434.

⁵ Carson (1991), p. 629.

Vs. 39 – Coincidentally, Joseph of Arimathea wasn't the only member of the Sanhedrin who honored Jesus at his death. John tells us, "And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight." This is the same "Nicodemus" who, in chapter 7, counseled against condemning Jesus without a proper trial (cf. 7:51-51) and who, in chapter 3, came "to Jesus by night" (3:2), which is, as Klink explains, "an equally negative depiction of Nicodemus that parallels the previously fearful status of Joseph."⁶ However, as with Joseph, there's a clear change in the characterization of Nicodemus here. Considering that the sun had yet to set and the Sabbath had yet to begin (cf. vs. 31), Nicodemus is shown assisting with Jesus' burial in *broad daylight*.⁷ Consequently, as with Joseph, Nicodemus seems to be outing himself. Though his Sanhedrin associates had masterminded this ordeal, Nicodemus had no qualms about associating himself with the crucified Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22-25). His attachment to the Lord, which was once something he wanted to hide, was now something he wanted to display (cf. Rom. 1:16).

And what a display this was. Nicodemus brought with him "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight." The use of perfume to mask the odor of the dead isn't notable; such was the custom of the day. Additionally, while "myrrh" was one of the spices given by the magi in Mat. 2:11, providing an interesting correlation between Jesus' birth and death, even though that isn't the most significant observation here. What is truly remarkable is the *quantity* of this spice blend. Unlike the *one* "pound" (11.5oz) of "pure nard," Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet (cf. 12:3), Nicodemus used around a "hundred-pound weight" of myrrh and aloes, which is equivalent to around *seventy pounds*! Admittedly, we're not told the value of such a weight. However, comparing the two amounts suggests that Nicodemus' gift would've cost an *exorbitant* sum. If *one pound* of spikenard cost Mary "300 denarii" (12:5)—i.e., what a laborer could earn in a year—then *seventy pounds* of myrrh/aloer doubtless cost even more. After all, as spikenard had to be shipped from the far east (*see notes 12:2-3*), myrrh and aloer also had to be imported, likely from the Arabian peninsula in the far south. Theoretically, assuming the cost of these spices is equivalent, Nicodemus could've paid upwards of *30,000 denarii*.⁸ Such a sum was more than what a working man could earn in a *lifetime*.⁹ Given this, Nicodemus had no small regard for the Lord; perhaps, like Joseph of Arimathea, he was a believer too.

Vs. 40-42 – "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;

⁶ Klink (2016), p. 818.

⁷ Carson (1991), p. 629, "Nicodemus shows he is stepping out of the darkness and emerging into the light."

⁸ Keener (2003), 2:1163.

⁹ Klink (2016), p. 818.

and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulcher was nigh at hand."

Burial practices varied in the ancient world. The Romans used cremation, while the Egyptians embalmed their dead.¹⁰ For the Jews, there were two phases in the burial process. The first phase, what John calls "the manner of the Jews," consisted of the deceased being wrapped in multiple layers of spice-soaked white bandages, and then the body would be laid in a cave-like tomb.¹¹ This phase is intended to *hasten* decomposition while minimizing the stench that comes from such a process. The second phase occurred later, once the body had fully broken down and only the skeletal structure remained. At this point, the bones would be placed into stone jars called "ossuaries" and then placed on shelves in the tomb.¹² Consequently, graves such as this were like family burial plots, housing multiple generations. Hence, it is significant that John mentions that the "sepulcher" in which the body of Jesus was placed was "new...wherein was never man yet laid." Joseph of Arimathea had this tomb made for his family (cf. Mat. 27:60), and yet instead of him or one of his relatives using it first, he gives it to Jesus. Such a gesture bestowed great honor on the Lord. But, more than this, establishing that Jesus was the only one buried in that tomb sets the stage for a completely empty tomb in chapter 20.¹³ One person was laid to rest in that place. When John and Peter inspect that garden tomb (cf. 20:1-10), there will be no confusion about the identity of the person who went missing.

Additionally, with "the Jews' preparation day" nearly over and the Sabbath would soon begin, the tomb's placement—i.e., "nigh at hand"—made Joseph's tomb the perfect place to bury Jesus; it expedited the entire process, ensuring no one broke the Sabbath's prohibition on work. How fortuitous that the things needed for a proper burial were so close at hand (cf. Mar. 11:2)!

From Joseph of Arimathea putting Jesus in an unused garden tomb to Nicodemus anointing the Lord's body with expensive perfumes, this scene has an air of *royalty*.¹⁴ Both King Manasseh and his successor, Amon, were buried in a "garden" (cf. 2 Ki. 21:18, 26).¹⁵ When King Asa died,

¹⁰ Köstenberger (2008), p. 555.

¹¹ Köstenberger (2008), p. 555-556, "Remarkably, the washing of Jesus' body, the most important service rendered to a dead person, is not mentioned by any of the evangelists." He explains in the footnote that this is likely due to the lack of time.

¹² Gower, Ralph, *The New Manners & Customs of Bible Times*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2005), p. 69.

¹³ Carson (1991), p. 630.

¹⁴ Klink (2016), p. 818-819.

¹⁵ Köstenberger (2008), p. 556; Klink (2016), p. 820, "Schaper has shown that in the OT and other ancient literature there is an explicit connection between gardens and kings. The careful and intentional reference to a garden as the place of the burial of Jesus [quoting Schaper] "was intended to make an extremely important symbolic point: the tomb of Jesus, like that of David and other Davidic rulers, is located in a garden."

he was laid “in the bed which was filled with sweet odors and divers kinds of spices prepared by the apothecaries' art” (2 Chron. 16:14). When Herod the Great died, five hundred servants bore spices during his funeral procession.¹⁶ At the funeral of a famous rabbi (Gamaliel), one of his students burned *eighty pounds* of spices along with his master.¹⁷ When asked why he did it, he mentioned this was the custom for kings and then said, "Is not Rabbi Gamaliel far better than a hundred kings?"¹⁸ Thus, as we've seen throughout John's account, Jesus is portrayed as a king even in his burial. But unlike any monarch in history, the Son of God will not need this garden tomb for long; his stay will only last three days. At this point, the crucified King will become the resurrected Lord, and a grave will forever give up its dead for the first time. A tomb will become the birthplace of new life.

¹⁶ Carson (1991), p. 630.

¹⁷ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 359.

¹⁸ Ibid.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 92 | John 19:38-42

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

Last week, we saw confirmation of Jesus' death. Today, we'll study his burial. One of the gospel's core claims, which Paul calls a matter of "first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3), is that the Lord was buried. Considering that the empty tomb is foundational to the doctrine of the resurrection, we must pay attention to John's details here.

Additionally, a description of Jesus' burial is presented, along with the appearance of two unlikely witnesses: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. These two characters are members of the Sanhedrin, the very group who got Jesus crucified! But as we'll see, they are not like their colleagues. One will take custody of Jesus' body and donate his own tomb for the Lord's burial, while the other will anoint Jesus' body with a perfume mixture that costs a fortune. Such actions will make their affinity for Jesus known to all. Joseph had been secretive about being Jesus' disciple; now, he didn't care who knew. Nicodemus had come to Jesus under cover of night; now, he honored the Lord in broad daylight.

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