

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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John 19:38-42 -- A Burial Fit For A King

by Dan Trygg

“After these things...” (vs. 38) -- That is, after it was clear that Jesus was dead. **“...Joseph of Arimathea...”** - Arimathea was a small village about twenty miles NW of Jerusalem, in the hill country of what had been the portion of the tribe of Ephraim. What else do we know of this Joseph? We know that he was a good and righteous man, one who had been expecting the Kingdom of God. He was also wealthy, and a well-respected member of the Sanhedrin, the Council of the Jews (Matt. 27:57; Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:50). Because of his prominence, and his role in Jesus' burial, He is referred to in all four gospels. **“...being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews...”** -- Literally, the Greek says, “...but having been hidden on account of the fear of the Jews”. John reminds us of the oppressive, controlling nature of the religious authorities of Jesus' day. Like the crowd in the Temple (7:11-13), and the parents of the blind man (9:18-23), Joseph had been fearful of standing up for Jesus in any public way, lest some kind of rejection or sanctions would be levied against him. **“...asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus...”** -- Typically, the bodies of victims of a Roman execution would be simply brought to the city dump and left unburied, a final public indignity for those who would dare to cross Rome. At best, they would be buried in an unmarked grave in a place of dishonor. The notoriety of the crime often determined the final treatment of the corpse. Understandably, a family member might ask that the body be released to them, to avoid such loathsome treatment of their loved one. **For Joseph to make this request was a very bold and courageous act of love and respect for Jesus** (Mk. 15:43).

Devotion to Jesus overcame his cowardice. This act also publicly clarified that he had *not* been in agreement with the other Council members, who had plotted against and condemned Jesus to death (Lk. 23:51). **“...and Pilate granted permission.”** -- From Mark we learn that Pilate was surprised that Jesus would already be dead, since often those crucified would live two or three days. Thus, **Pilate specifically summoned and questioned the centurion in charge of the execution to confirm the fact of Jesus' death**, whereupon he released the body to Joseph. This is another evidence that Jesus had not simply passed out. He was unquestionably dead. The fact that Pilate released Jesus' body to Joseph is unusual, but probably arose from the fact that he knew Jesus was innocent. Probably due to the pangs of his own conscience, he saw no purpose in allowing further abuse or indignity to one he had desired to acquit. In a passive-aggressive manner, he also was able, by this, to somewhat dull the self-satisfaction of the enemies of Jesus. **“So he came and took away His body.”** -- Mark and Luke intimate that Jesus was still hanging on the cross when Joseph arrived (Mk. 15:46; Lk. 23:53). **Jesus' removal from the cross did not happen immediately upon His death. There was a significant interval of time in between**, long enough for Joseph to visit Pilate, ...for Pilate to send for and question the centurion, ...and then for Joseph to purchase linen in the marketplace before returning to take Jesus' body from the cross. **This renders any so-called “swoon theory” (i.e., that Jesus had not really died, but had only passed out) ridiculous.** To be hanging that long without a breath was impossible. Remember, in order to take a breath, the victim would have to move to push himself up, an action which would have been seen by the guards or bystanders. **This interval is another strong line of evidence that establishes the finality of Jesus' death.**

“Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came...” (vs. 39) -- Only John mentions Nicodemus' part in the preparation of Jesus' body. (We met Nicodemus in chapter 3, and he surfaced again in 7:50,51). He was a “ruler of the Jews” (3:1), which probably indicates that he had a seat on the Sanhedrin, as did Joseph. He was a Pharisee, and a well-known teacher (3:1,10). **“...bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.”** -- The mixture of these aromatic spices was commonly used in preparing the dead. The “pounds” referred to here are 12 oz. pounds, or “troy weight”. The equivalent in avoirdupois weight would be 75 pounds. Stop for a moment and think of how much a can of cinnamon is, usually about one quarter of a pound. We are talking about *buckets* of spices! Even if you were to think of water, how many buckets would it take to make up 75 pounds? Close to nine bucketfuls! Dried spices would have weighed *less* than water, requiring a *greater volume* to make up 75 pounds. **The amount purchased was enough for 100 or more standard burials! Only kings and great persons were buried with such large amounts of spices.** By comparison, the great rabbi Gamaliel was buried with 40 pounds of spices, ...and *that* was noteworthy enough to record for future posterity! The cost of such a large amount of spices would also have been very expensive, certainly more than the disciples or the family of Jesus could have ever afforded. Although Nicodemus was undoubtedly also a wealthy man, this special treatment of the corpse of Jesus could only indicate a very deep admiration and love which Nicodemus must have developed. Unfortunately, there is no mention of either of these men after this careful, loving, ...yet unfinished..., preparation of Jesus' body for burial. **Just as Jesus' birth**

was marked with extravagant gifts, so also in His death He was honored lavishly, ...truly a burial fit for a King!

Again, the contrast with the ignominious end of most crucified criminals is striking, and would have been even more stark to the people of that generation who were more familiar with what was common practice.

“So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.” (vs. 40) -- There is some confusion regarding the “burial custom of the Jews”. Did they use a shroud? Did they wrap the dead in linen strips, much as an Egyptian mummy? Did they use a casket or sarcophagus? **We tend to “read in” our own suppositions as to how it “must have been”.** Our translations have *perpetuated*, not clarified, some of these misunderstandings. It *appears* that the first three gospels tell us that a shroud was used (Matt. 27:59; Mk. 15:46; Lk. 23:53), whereas John seems to be describing something like a mummy-style preparation. This confusion is magnified by claims that the “burial cloth of Jesus” has been found (e.g., the Shroud of Turin, ...one of *several* ancient cloths for which this holy notoriety has been asserted). Most of these questions disappear, however, if one looks closely and seriously at the texts, and compares these with the results of archaeological findings. We now know, for example, that **it was customary for the Jews to bury their dead within a few hours of death. Thus, the hasty preparations made here, although pressured additionally by the time constraints of the afternoon time of Jesus’ death, and the beginning of the Passover Sabbath at sundown, would not have been all that unusual.** Hence, Joseph and Nicodemus would have known right where to go to purchase the supplies they needed for this task, and these ingredients would have been already prepared, meaning that **the main task involved would have been the application process.**

It was customary for the corpse to be washed, anointed, then straightened and bound tightly with linen strips (cf. 11:44), about a foot wide. There is some question as to the use of the spices. In one view, they were mixed together with oil in a paste-like consistency, and added between the layers of linen. Not only did this serve as an aromatic preservative, but it also dried to cement the bandages into a hardened shell that adhered to the body. Others think they were a dry powder stuffed between the layers of wrappings. The purpose of the spices was *not* to be a preservative, but to merely cover the smell of putrefaction. The jaw was also tied shut, and the head wrapped around with linen, much like a turban, with the end of the length, or “napkin” placed over the face (cf. 11:44). **Speculations about a “shroud” or “burial cloth” are unfounded. A closer examination of the original language supports this,** as there is no indefinite article in the Greek (i.e., no “a” or “an”). Hence, when the translators wrote that Joseph bought “a linen cloth”, **the actual Greek simply says that he “bought linen”.** **The details of how the linen was used is described for us by John, although the language of the other writers also refer to the same practices,** e.g., “wrapped” in Matt. 27:59 and Lk. 23:53 means literally “to roll up” or “wrap in”; and the word in Mk. 15:46 (a *different* Greek word choice) also means to “wrap in”. Hence, instead of simply covering the body with a sheet, **Jesus’ body was wrapped mummy-style from the feet to the neck, and a separate cloth was used to wrap His head and cover His face** with a “napkin”. The gummy spice mixture would have soaked through the grave clothes, sticking them not only to each other, but also to Jesus’ body. (Removal of the grave clothes, then, would have been a very difficult and messy process.)

“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.” (vs. 41) -- **From Matthew, we find that it was Joseph’s own tomb,** one which he had hewn out of the rock hillside (Matt. 27:60), so **there would have been no other entrance but the front doorway.** It was not uncommon for anyone of moderate wealth to prepare a tomb for the burial of family members. Undoubtedly, the fact that Joseph had purchased a site in Jerusalem, though his village was some twenty miles distant, was indicative of his piety. Normally, family tombs would have been in the vicinity of their home village. To be buried in Jerusalem, the holy city, was desirable, but typically only the local inhabitants, ...or those of prestige or wealth would be buried there. Joseph fit in the latter class. **Rock hewn tombs were cut into the hillside, and usually consisted of a court, which was nine feet square,** where the funeral procession would come to an end, and family members would gather for any final services. **On the sides of the room, burial niches, or shelves, were cut out of the rock. On one of these, the body would be laid, and the final preparations of wrappings and spices would be made.**

“Therefore because it was the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.” (vs. 42) -- We find here *the reason* for Jesus being placed in Joseph’s tomb. The day was drawing to a close, and there was little time to look for other accommodations. **Joseph’s tomb was close at hand, and ready. Thus, the prophecy of Isaiah 53:9 was fulfilled: “His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death.”**

As you think of Jesus’ interment, in your mind imagine that **His body had been wrapped up on all sides in an encasement of two to three inches of spices wrapped up between layers of cloth.** This would have been done respectfully, carefully, leaving no areas exposed, up to the neck, or chin. Then, they would have wrapped a turban around His head, with more spices, and folded the last corner over His face. **For Him to escape would be unthinkable,** being tied and bound underneath layers of cloth and spices, and **to steal the body would have required body snatchers to deal with those pungent, gummy and heavy grave clothes.**