

STAND UP FOR JESUS!

19 ³⁸After these things, Joseph of Arimathaea, a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate for permission to take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. Therefore he came and took away his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, the man who first visited [Jesus] at night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰So they took the body of Jesus and wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen cloth, in accordance with the Jewish burial custom. ⁴¹Now near the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (Jn. 19:38-42)

15 ⁴²Since it was the [day of] Preparation, (that is, the day before the Sabbath), therefore, when it was evening, ⁴³Joseph of Arimathaea—a prominent member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God—boldly went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴Pilate was surprised that he was already dead; so, summoning the centurion, he inquired whether [Jesus] was already dead. ⁴⁵When he learned from the centurion that it was so, [Pilate] granted the corpse to Joseph. ⁴⁶[Joseph] bought a linen cloth, and taking the body down [from the cross], he wrapped it in the linen cloth. [Then] he placed it in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock and rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷Now Mary Magdalene and Mary the [mother] of Joseph saw where he was laid. (Mk. 15:42-47)

Introduction

Do you ever feel self-conscious about offering prayer in a restaurant, or quietly bowing your head in prayer before a meal when in the company of unbelievers? Do you feel hesitant or timid about pointing a friend or co-worker to Christ when they confide in you about their problems? Do you view it as unthinkable to knock on a stranger's door and offer him a gospel tract and an invitation to church? Do you feel paralyzed when your boss instructs you to do something that would violate your Christian convictions and you know you should say no and state your reason? Do you feel too intimidated to respond when your teacher or professor asks if anyone believes the Bible as opposed to the popular religion of secular humanism? Are you too embarrassed to indicate that you, too, are a Christian when an acquaintance speaks about "those Christians" and their views in a derogatory way?

As Christians, we often times are embarrassed and afraid—sometimes even petrified—to publicly acknowledge our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. In this passage of Scripture presently before us, we meet two such men. First, we meet Joseph of Arimathaea. He was a disciple, *"but secretly for fear of the Jews"* (Jn. 19:38.) He did not actively oppose the Sanhedrin; he merely *"did not consent with their counsel and deed"* (Lk. 23:51.) Next, we meet Nicodemus. He originally came to Jesus by night (Jn. 19:39.) The best he could manage was a mild protest early on against the Jews' actions: *"Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their*

own number, asked, ⁵¹Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" (Jn. 7:50-51.)

But here we now find these timid, fainthearted men courageously stepping forward and acknowledging their allegiance to Jesus. Perhaps their motivation was the fact that they had personally witnessed the death of Jesus—and the impact of that sight overcame their natural fears.

Like Joseph and Nicodemus, we, too, must, by the grace of God, conquer our fear of publicly acknowledging our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. Christian, because Jesus gave His life for us, will we not stand up for Him?

I. Stand Up for Jesus, Because You are His Disciple

We are explicitly told that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, yet he was so *"secretly out of fear of the Jews."* Up to this time he was acting out of character; he was concealing his true beliefs and was not acting in conformity with his Christian faith. Consider the example of a contemporary Christian brother, whose complete testimony was presented in a previous message (*Facing Trials with Christ-like Prayer*):

Even though he was a Christian, he had always been very vulnerable to peer pressure, both in high school and at work. He had gone through a period of being one person at church and at home, and a different person at work. Gradually, though, he had become stronger in his Christian life: his commitment to Christ had become firmer, and the men at work began to see the difference in him. More and more he was finding a mission field among his fellow workers. (*POWER 5/4/86*)

There is the need for each of us as Christians to grow and develop in our commitment to Christ, with the consequence being that we increasingly act in accordance with our character and identity as disciples of Christ. This is the desire the Apostle Paul expresses for the Philippian Christians:

Live your life only in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that if I come and see you—or if I remain absent what I will hear about you is that you are standing firm in one spirit, and with one soul are contending for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and that you are in no way being intimidated by those who oppose you. (Phil. 1:27-28a)

The LORD Himself promises to uphold us: *"Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; surely, I will help you; surely, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"* (Isa. 41:10.) Furthermore, He reproves our timidity and cowardliness:

I, I am the one who comforts you. Who [do you think] you are—you who are afraid of [mortal] man who shall die, [afraid of] a son of man who is made like a blade of grass? ¹³You have forgotten Jehovah your Maker, the one who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. (Isa. 51:12-13a)

Consider the person of the Holy Spirit whom the LORD has caused to dwell within our hearts: *“God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline”* (2 Tim. 1:7.) Let us rely upon Him with confidence: *“I can do all things by him who strengthens me”* (Phil. 4:13.)

Let us stand up for Jesus, because we are His disciples. May God cause us to become so concerned with Him and His truth and righteousness and His glory, that we forget ourselves in a holy way and simply stand up for Christ and His truth. May the LORD enable us to become like those of the early church: *“After they prayed ... they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly”* (Acts 4:31.) We may be quiet Christians by temperament, or by intimidation; but there may be a time when the Lord says to us, “Stand up and be counted! Stand up and act!” Remember Moses, the LORD declared to him, *“So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt ... I will be with you”* (Ex. 3:10-12.) Remember the counsel Mordecai gave to Esther when she was called to present the cause of her people, the Jews, before the king of Persia:

... if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this? (Esth. 4:14)

II. Stand Up for Jesus, Even though It May be Costly

Joseph of Arimathea had a lot to lose. He was a wealthy man—Mathew 27:57 describes him as *“a rich man from Arimathea.”* He was a prominent member of the Jewish council (Mk. 15:43.)

His action might well have gotten him into trouble with the Romans; it could possibly have cost him his life. According to the commentator, William Lane, generally speaking, “permission to bury one convicted of high treason was denied on principle. Whenever such a request was granted, the action represented a special dispensation by the imperial magistrate” (*The New International Commentary, The Gospel of Mark*, p. 518.) How would the Roman authorities react to a wealthy, influential Jew providing a proper burial for this man Jesus who so recently had been accused of treason and previously had the support of the multitudes behind Him? Not too many years earlier, Marc Antony’s speech at the funeral of Julius Caesar had led to a civil war.

Most certainly Joseph's action would have gotten him into trouble with the Jews. He would no doubt be expelled from the Sanhedrin and perhaps be excommunicated from the synagogue. When the Jewish leaders questioned the parents of the blind man upon whom Jesus bestowed sight, they were afraid of the consequences if they spoke in favor of Jesus:

We know he is our son, the parents answered, and we know he was born blind. ²¹But how he can now see, or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself. ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. ²³That was why his parents said, He is of age; ask him. (Jn. 9:20-23)

John informs us, *"many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved praise from men more than praise from God"* (Jn. 12:42-43.)

Nevertheless, despite having so much to lose (his status, his communion with fellow Jews, perhaps even his life), Joseph went boldly to Pilate; literally, *"he summoned up his courage and went in."* In a manner similar to Joseph, consider Esther's reply to Mordicai when he instructed her to appear before the king on behalf of the Jews, even though she had not been invited by the king to do so: *"I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish"* (Esth. 4:16.) Upon receiving permission from Pilate, Joseph publicly took the body down from the cross.

Let us stand up for Jesus, even though it may be costly to do so. Consider the effect of Christian courage on an unbeliever: Observing the commitment of Christians to go to Uganda, even in the face of very real danger, an unbeliever was convinced of the fact that Christ was alive—such was the effect that Christian conviction acted upon had upon an unbeliever who witnessed it (as related in Dr. Jack Miller's book, *Come Back, Barbara.*)

Consider the affect of an act of Christian courage upon other believers. The Apostle Paul's testifies that his courageous witness for Christ, even while in Roman captivity, inspired fellow Christians to become bolder in their witness for Christ:

Now I want you to know, brothers, that the things that have happened to me have [actually] resulted in the advancement of the gospel. ¹³It has become evident to the whole Praetorian guard and to everyone else that I am a prisoner for Christ. ¹⁴Furthermore, due to my imprisonment, many of the brothers have become much more confident in the Lord, taking it upon themselves to speak the word without fear. (Phil. 1:12-14)

III. Stand Up for Jesus, by Rising to the Occasion

Joseph stepped forward and did what was necessary. At the close of the day he took the body of Jesus down from the cross and gave Him a proper burial. Again, according to Dr. William Lane, "It was not at all uncommon for a body to be left upon a cross either to rot or to be eaten by predatory birds or animals" (*The New International Commentary, The Gospel of Mark*, p. 578.) Furthermore it was the Old Testament law that a corpse not be permitted to hang upon a tree after sunset:

If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, ²³you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land Jehovah your God is giving you as an inheritance. (Deut. 21:22-23)

Mary, the mother of Jesus, would surely have been too weak and too exhausted to have performed this work. Jesus' brothers did not yet believe in Him as the Messiah, as is noted in John 7:5, "*even his own brothers did not believe in him.*" All of the disciples, except for John, had fled (Matt. 26:56b.)

Now as Joseph busies himself with the cumbersome cross and the lifeless bloodied corpse, he soon finds that he is not alone: Nicodemus has come to do his part. When we stand up for Christ we may be surprised to find that there are others of like mind who will stand with us, they only needed for someone to take the lead and show the way. But if we should find ourselves standing alone, may we remember the testimony of the Apostle Paul as recorded in 2 Timothy 4:16-17, "*At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. ¹⁷But the LORD stood at my side and gave me strength*" (2 Tim. 4:16-17a.)

These two men, Joseph and Nicodemus, must have been brought to the realization that their status, their acceptance, and all that they stood to lose, was not worth the price of silence, of passive compliance, of cowering before wicked men. They could no longer live with themselves or with their "friends" on the Sanhedrin, their consciences would not let them, they had to act! What else can explain their action? They act now even though there was no longer any earthly reward—Jesus was dead, He was not going to overthrow the Romans and establish a new state of Israel. Humanly speaking, all that was to be gained was only risk and rejection. Joseph stepped forward out of conviction: he witnessed the depths of Jesus' love; he witnessed the awful injustice perpetrated by the Sanhedrin; he witnessed the horror of the crucifixion and the curse of God; and he could quietly stand by no longer.

Let us stand up for Jesus, by rising to the occasion. By way of example, consider the testimony of Dr. Jack Miller as he sought to witness to his unconverted daughter, even at the risk of losing her companionship:

I had been praying for a Christian friend of mine. His unconverted brother had slipped into a coma and, so far as could be known, had died without coming to know Christ. This Christian friend and I shared this sorrow together ... to quote my Christian friend, "Will I only take my brother with me to heaven as a beautiful memory?"

... his words haunted me as I thought of my own situation. Was this, in spite of everything, to be Barbara's end as well? I trembled at the thought. What a tragedy that would be!

If my love was genuine, I should be willing to confront her with the issue of life or death. It would be painful, and she might become angry and upset. But I concluded that if Christ was working in her life, then her initial reaction would pass away. If he was not working in her life, then there was nothing I could do anyway ...

So in late August of 1979, I girded myself for the last battle. I committed myself to talking to her and telling her simply and forthrightly how it made me feel that she would not be with me in heaven. I humbled my pride and asked her to meet with me in our living room.

She sat in the chair next to the fireplace. I sat across from her. As I began, my feelings were mixed. On one hand, I was leaning on God because of my fear that I might say something foolish. On the other hand, I was filled with the compulsion of God's love to reach Barbara's heart with the truth about life and reality.

"Barbara," I said, "you know your mother and I are really pleased with how well you've done with your work and education. It's a great time in our lives to see you go off to Stanford and lay plans for a good future with Angelo. But there's a burden on my heart I feel I must share with you. It's simply that when it's all said and done, this life is soon over. I have been thinking that of my own life. And I want you to know that it seems so sad to me that when I go to heaven, I will only take you along as a beautiful memory."

I had meant to say a bit more, but when those last words came out, Barbara became very angry ...

In her fury Barbara denounced me vehemently. It went on for several minutes. The substance of it was that I was always fighting with her, laying a guilt trip on her, and making her feel bad.

While she was going on, I listened, said nothing, and prayed. I prayed in confidence for God to touch her conscience with his Spirit, to convict her of sin, and to give her an awareness that it is insane to organize your life as though this present world was eternal.

Eventually she stopped. Again, I gathered my courage. "... I do not want to go to heaven and take you there as a beautiful memory."

I hardly had those last words out of my mouth when Barbara blew all the fuses once more, with equal intensity. Again I prayed and waited. When she stopped, I said, "... It seems to me there's nothing wrong in what I just said. What's wrong with my telling you that I want you to go to heaven with me?"

The atmosphere was aflame with tension. But suddenly it broke. The look on Barbara's face changed. She burst into tears and came across the room and fell at my feet. With tears streaming down her face, she looked up and said, "Dad, we are going to have to do this more often."

... For several minutes we just sat there. Finally I broke the silence. "Barb, I want to ask you to do only one thing. Will you ask Jesus to reveal himself to you? Just that. Will you ask him to show himself to you?"

"I will," she said. "I want to. I'll ask him to show himself to me."

"That's all I ask. That's enough. He'll hear your prayer. I know he will. I love you. God be with you."

For me, the last battle with Barbara was over ... Barbara's conscience had now been confronted on a deep level. I had no doubt that this was the Lord's work and that he would complete it. (Dr. Jack Miller, *Come Back, Barbara*, pp.132-134)

Conclusion

Christian, let us stand up for Jesus when and where it is needed: before the world, in the church, in our own homes. May God give us the grace to stand up for the risen Lord with the same boldness and loving devotion that these two disciples, Joseph and Nicodemus, exhibited in ministering to our Lord's body in His death.