

**Joseph of Arimathea**

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“What would happen to me now” I wondered as I sat in my house on that Friday evening? There was no more doubt about where I stood with respect to Jesus. Word would soon spread through the streets about what I’d done. It would eventually get back to the council. They would be spitting mad. How would they vent their rage?

But perhaps I should introduce myself. My name is Joseph. I was born in a little village called Arimathea outside of Jerusalem. I was raised in an orthodox Jewish home. We were very careful to obey the law and live devout lives before our God. My father was a priest and was blessed with a smart mind – so smart that when a vacancy came open on the Sanhedrin, they asked him to take it. The Sanhedrin was the highest religious council in our nation. Approximately 70 different priests, scholars and elders governed Judaism from Jerusalem. A member of the Sanhedrin gained great prestige and honor.

Yet it meant we had to move to Jerusalem. So we left Arimathea in my early childhood. Soon, the blessings or perks of a Sanhedrin family came into our lives. My father was paid well. So I grew up in a wealthy home. My parents wanted to ensure I got the best things in life. After a while, the wealth that came with serving on the Sanhedrin kind of took over our lives. We depended on it much more than we depended on God as I look back.

It seemed my parents were convinced that health and everything we needed could be purchased through wealth. They thought poverty was the worst curse that could fall on a person. If you could be free from poverty, you could be free indeed. So they bought me lots of stuff; toys; the nicest clothes; even a horse. I went to the most privileged school. And we went on trips to see different parts of the Empire. It was fun being in a family where people bowed respectfully to your father.

But as time went on I began to struggle with fear. My parents often worried about losing their position or the house or their money. Somehow that fear transferred to me. I began to believe that the only way you could hang on to all we had was to fiercely protect it. Fear spread to my outlook on life. I didn’t want to try new things for fear of failure. So I never attempted to learn a trade lest I not be good at it. I never got married in case it didn’t work out. I didn’t want to risk the loss of position and respect that might come if I married the wrong person.

Eventually, my father aged and retired. When his time was done, we had enough connections to ensure that I replaced him on the council. I remember my first time sitting there thinking about all I had achieved. I was very proud. I was part of the most powerful group in Israel.

My parents passed away a few years after that and left me everything. So I purchased a newer nicer home in a different neighborhood of Jerusalem. Servants and slaves took care of my every need.

I seemed to have it all. Yet I was not free. The fear of losing it all gripped my heart like a vise that wouldn't let go. I could also see fear grip my colleagues on the council. They trusted in their position and power for their hope. So they held onto it tightly. When anything or anyone threatened that position, we all responded like a mother bear cornered with her cubs. "How dare anyone question us?" became a common outcry on the council.

One threat came in the form of a seemingly powerless carpenter from Galilee. He hadn't gone to any of the good schools in Jerusalem. But people kept talking about his teaching. He talked about the kingdom of heaven being near. So one time when he was in Jerusalem, I determined to find out what this was all about. I paid a friend to secretly get me near this Galilean to hear him teach. We stood back near some trees while he taught.

On that day I heard these words – "Look at the birds, they neither sow nor reap, nor build barns yet God feeds them all. Are your simple needs not well known to God before you even ask? Your task on earth is to trust in your Father's care – for he knows your every hair. God knows when a sparrow falls. Yet you're much more valuable than them. So don't worry about life what you will wear and eat. Instead seek first his kingdom and all these will be added unto you. Don't worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself? Each day has enough trouble of its own."

I was stunned. The way he talked, you didn't have to depend on wealth and position to experience contentment. You didn't have to jealously guard your position for God to take care of you. It was like a breath of fresh air in my fearful heart. I knelt down and quietly put my faith in God more than my wealth for the very first time in my life.

As time passed, my fears and worries began to fall away. I began to see the joy of giving liberally to the poor. I gained more excitement from seeing people's eyes light up with joy than sitting in my parlor counting my gold. I would also try to hear this Jesus teach every time he came to Jerusalem. While my colleagues in the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus, I grew more convinced that he was a teacher from God.

I had only one worry that continued to gnaw at me. It was my secret following of Jesus. I didn't let anyone on the Sanhedrin know. Surely I could continue to hold my position on that council and do good from that position rather than risk disturbing the peace.

But all that changed during that Passover. Word came in the middle of the night that the council was meeting. We never met in the middle of the night. This was something profoundly unusual.

By the time I arrived, the council was in a frenzy. There was Jesus – bound like a common criminal. What was going on – they brought in these witnesses that couldn't agree on anything. This trial did not follow legal procedure. Finally two of these so called witnesses claimed Jesus said he would destroy the temple and build it in three days.

Caiaphas the high priest asked Jesus about this charge. Jesus said nothing in defense. So the High Priest pressed him. "Tell us plainly. Are you the Christ, the Son of God?" The Christ? That was the Messiah; the anticipated deliverer of our nation. I had never really thought of Jesus like that before.

Jesus replied – "You have said so. But from now on you will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds and seated at the right hand of power.

Audible gasps filled the room. Jesus had just claimed to be God's Son. Could it be that he was not just a messenger from God? Could He somehow be God's Son?

The council blew up. Caiaphas tore his robes. He declared Jesus' statement blasphemy. He asked for a verdict. The council shouted "He is worthy of death." They began to curse him and some punched him.

I sat there watching for a moment too stunned to move. But this went too far. So I stood up. "Brothers, stop! Brothers, this is not becoming of us." They quieted down for a moment. "Brothers, I want to register my dissent!"

Eyes of fury burned into me as someone shouted "No. He's a blasphemer." The chaos erupted again and they took Jesus away to spend the night in a cell below.

There wasn't anything more I could do that night. So I went home and pondered what could be done to reverse this crazy decision. But before I knew it, a messenger came that they had taken Jesus to Pilate, the Roman Governor. He would present Jesus at the Judgment Seat in a half an hour.

So I rushed to his judgment seat. Pilate came out to fulfill tradition. Release a prisoner to the crowds for Passover.

There stood the revolutionary Barabbas and the bloody, beaten, exhausted form of Jesus. Surely Pilate knew this was a sham. He called out to the crowd to ask which prisoner they wanted released. Here was the opportunity. A few voices called out for Jesus here and there. I joined them. But then I saw my colleagues on the council furiously confer. They began to chant in unison. “Barabbas. Barabbas. Barabbas.”

So this was it. They didn’t care about truth or justice. They were so threatened by Jesus that they just wanted Him dead. The crowd drowned out any faint cries for Jesus. Then Pilate rendered his verdict. He released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to be crucified.

How could my colleagues be filled with such hate? Why couldn’t we investigate this further? Why wouldn’t they listen to an alternative view?

Well that was the problem wasn’t it? There hardly had been an alternative view. The only one who had anything good to say about Jesus in the council up to that point was Nicodemus. Yet they always shut him down and refused to listen to his reasoning. I needed to go see Nicodemus now. Surely he would know what to do.

By the time I got there, news reached us that Jesus had been crucified. The Romans were pretty efficient at this public execution thing. We talked back and forth about what to do now. But it was too late to save Jesus. What good would speaking out on His behalf do now?

But then Nicodemus remembered the terrible conclusion to one crucified as a criminal. The Romans threw the bodies on the ground. Then they buried them in a common grave. Were we going to let this happen to Jesus?

At that moment I faced a great choice. I could do nothing. That meant I could probably hold onto my position. I might get a scolding from Caiaphas and a few others from the council. But it would eventually blow over. Then I could keep my seat on the council; and my house; and my money and I could try to influence things for good from that powerful chair. Besides, how would I live if I lost my position and my money and my house? I didn’t know any trade. I didn’t know any other means to make a living.

Yet Jesus’ teaching came back to me – The Father knows what you need before you ask. Do not worry about what you will eat or wear.” I was letting my worry about those things prevent me from standing up for Jesus in this time of great need.

No more fear – Jesus had freed me from that. No more worry. Jesus had given His life. The least I could do was give him a decent burial. After all, I had a tomb in one of the wealthiest burial sections in Jerusalem. No one was in it because I didn't have any family. I told Nicodemus to meet me by my tomb as soon as word came of Jesus' death. That word came much sooner than we expected.

So, I went to the governor's headquarters and asked to see him. My position helped me gain entrance to his court. I knew it was risky identifying myself with someone who had just been executed as a revolutionary. But no more fear. Pilate came down. When I presented my request, he seemed relieved. He wouldn't have to worry about what to do with the body.

So he granted my request and gave me a scroll with his permission in writing. I went back to tell Nicodemus to meet me by the tomb. I then gathered up a burial shroud and began making my way to Golgotha, the execution site. It was more horrific than I could ever have imagined. My mother had shielded me from such sights when I was a boy so I was also frightened of this. But now I stood before a brutal and bloody scene.

One of the soldiers guarding the bodies stood up as I approached and grabbed his weapon. He wasn't about to let anyone mess with him after all he'd been through that day. But I just held up my hand and handed him the scroll. He gave it to the centurion who read it and looked at me. "That one's unusual," he said gesturing to Jesus. I've never seen anyone like him nor experienced what happened after he died."

"Well get to it then. Take him down before it gets dark and you hurt yourself." "Take him down? Me?" I didn't know how to do that. I barely knew how to use a hammer. But he was serious. So I asked if I could use their ladder. I put it against the cross and climbed up to release one of Jesus' hands from the cross. I finally pried it away getting blood some of his blood all over my expensive clothes.

I moved the ladder to release his other hand when the centurion said, "whoa now. You might break him in half if you do it like that. Here, put this rope around the body and I'll have the men hold the other end." So they threw a rope up and I put under Jesus arm around his chest and under the other arm. Then I threw that end of the rope over the back of the cross to the soldiers. I release his other hand and then his feet while the soldiers held the rope.

Then they slowly lowered the body. I waited at the base of the cross with my shroud. I wrapped him in it and then with the help of a couple of others, we began carrying him towards my tomb.

Waiting there was Nicodemus with an array of spices. We quickly anointed the shroud and then placed Jesus in my tomb. A couple of women who had been in Jesus' group followed us and watched us very closely. I understood they might be suspicious of someone from the Sanhedrin taking Jesus' body after what the Sanhedrin had done to Jesus. But they nodded with appreciation as we placed him inside and rolled the stone across the entrance.

I went home that night to change my blood stained clothes and thought for the first time about potential consequences for my actions. Would Caiaphas put a price on my head? He had the ability to get Jesus executed. It would surely be easier to get rid of me. Yet, I wasn't afraid anymore. Somehow I trusted that God would look after my needs in the days ahead, whatever those needs might be. Jesus' teaching released me from a lifetime of bondage to fear, worry and faith in something temporary. He was somehow God's Son. There had to be some greater purpose in all of this. He had given His life. How could I not respond with anything less than mine?

I wonder if any of you might be stuck in a bondage like mine. Maybe you trust in wealth or your position or your reputation and think that they will somehow give you freedom. Maybe you don't trust anyone or anything but yourself to see you through life. But you find yourself living in fear and anxiety trying to hang onto that which you put your trust in. But will it see you through the major challenges life brings? Will it see you through death? We don't know what awaits us like I didn't know what awaited me on that Friday evening so many years ago. But you don't have to fear if you know and trust Jesus.