

Mark 15:42-47

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[0 : 00] I wonder what's your favorite Bible story?

Now, there's a few cracking stories in the Bible, and although it's not a very original choice, one that has to be up there is the story of David and Goliath.

Although, I have to say, if I had to identify one story that's my particular favorite as a story, it's got to be the story of Esther. Just the plot in the story of Esther is just so intriguing and so many twists and turns that as a story, it's got to be up there as one of my favorites.

It's plot worthy of an Oscar, and of course, the best part is that it's all true. And I wonder what is it that attracts us to characters like David, especially in connection with his exploits with Goliath and Esther?

I think one thing that's true of both of them is that they both stepped up to the mark at a time of crisis. In the face of a challenge against all odds, risking life and limb, when all others were busy keeping their heads down, David and Esther stood up to the mark.

[1 : 29] And if we turn to the New Testament, I wonder if there's any character who stands out in a similar way or for a similar reason. I think one character who is similar to David in his encounter with Goliath and Esther when she approached the king to advocate in favor of the Jews.

One person who is similar to them in this regard is Joseph of Arimathea. In many ways, Joseph was very different to Esther, very different to David, not as prominent a character as they both were.

But he also stood up to the mark. And what I want to do this morning is think about Joseph and to think about the manner in which he stood up to the mark.

And think about how what he did can serve as an example and as a challenge to us in our life as disciples of Jesus.

I want us to become in some ways like Joseph or maybe identify something in our lives, even in the days that lie ahead, even in this week that is beginning where we could take courage and do what Joseph did and step up to the mark.

[2 : 55] The way we're going to order what we're going to say is by posing four questions concerning Joseph and particularly about the manner in which he stood up to the mark.

And we'll just begin by getting to know him a little. So the first question that we pose is, what do we know about Joseph before he stood up to the mark? Who is this man who at the appointed time, at that moment, that critical moment, he stood up to the mark?

Who was he? What do we know about Joseph of Arimathea? Well, what does Mark tell us? Let's begin with the gospel account that we are considering.

Well, there we read in verse 42 that Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the council. Now, the council there is a reference to the Sanhedrin.

And we've met the Sanhedrin before, the ruling council of the Jews. It had been involved just in the previous hours in that critical moment of coming to a conclusion concerning Jesus being worthy of death.

[4 : 06] Now, we know that it didn't have the power that it would have liked to have because of the status of Palestine is under the thumb of Rome.

And so, as we've discovered just in these past few weeks, that decision had to then go to Pilate to get the Roman approval. But nonetheless, it was a very significant body.

And to be a member of the Sanhedrin was a pretty big deal. But to be described as Joseph is described as a prominent member of the council, very much identifies this man as a man who occupied a place at the very top table of Jewish life and society.

He was influential. He was respected. And he was, without doubt, a powerful man and a wealthy man.

Indeed, Matthew explicitly describes him as a rich man from Arimathea. So that much we know about him.

[5 : 10] But we also know that he was a good man marked by a genuine faith in the God of Israel. Mark tells us that he was waiting for the kingdom of God.

Now, that at first sight might be a little bit intriguing as to what does that actually mean? Perhaps we can put the same truth in other words, that Joseph was waiting for the coming of Messiah.

I don't think we would be being overly generous if we compared Joseph to Simeon, who we read of in Luke 22.

Luke 22 and verse 25 in the Nativity account. We meet this man. Luke 22 and in verse 25.

Now, there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. And the Holy Spirit was upon him.

[6 : 14] The connection with Simeon is simply this idea that both of these men, Simeon and Joseph, were waiting for the coming of Messiah.

The language that Mark uses to describe Joseph, that he was waiting for the kingdom of God, is also language that I imagine is deliberately used in that it echoes the language that Jesus used to describe his coming and mission.

So at the very beginning of Mark's gospel, in Mark chapter 1 and verse 15, when we first hear what Jesus has to say about his mission, about the reason for his coming, we read as follows in verse 15 of Mark chapter 1.

The time has come, he said, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news. And so Jesus was identifying himself as the one who men like Simeon and Joseph were waiting for the coming Messiah.

Then we have Luke who tells us that Joseph was a good and upright man. You don't need to look up the reference, but in Luke chapter 23 and in verse 50, Luke describes him with that language as a good and upright man or a good and righteous man.

[7 : 33] And so as we draw from the four evangelists, from the four gospel writers, we're able to put together a fairly full picture of this man, good and upright.

Matthew takes things to another level by describing Joseph quite explicitly as a disciple of Jesus. And then John, in his account of the same occasion, the burial, he uses that same language of Joseph being a disciple of Jesus.

But then John adds a helpful detail that we were touching on when we were speaking with the children. John tells us, but secretly because he feared the Jews.

So there we know a little bit about this man. I think that last detail is the one that we're maybe most familiar with, but he's most famous for, you know, Joseph of Arimathea, the secret disciple.

And I suspect that over the years that little word, secretly, hasn't done Joseph any favors. But I wonder if sometimes we read more into a word than charity would require.

[8 : 46] The fact that Joseph followed Jesus secretly doesn't necessarily mean that he was a secret disciple in the sense that nobody knew of his allegiance to Jesus, but perhaps simply that he tread carefully in the matter of making his allegiance known in company where such open allegiance would have brought serious problems for Joseph, and very especially in the council.

Where he was very careful not to identify himself, at least until this point, as a disciple or follower of Jesus.

And if we think that that was the path that he was walking along, I wonder, is that so different to the path that believers today have to faithfully tread in countries where open allegiance to Jesus can result in persecution and even death?

My purpose isn't to mount a defense of Joseph of Arimathea, but simply to pose the question if we can be overly critical of him for the fact that up to this point he had been secretly following or identifying with Jesus.

And if we are to stand in judgment over Joseph, I wonder what authority we would have to do so. For us, open allegiance to Jesus is unlikely to result in the grave consequences that could have followed Joseph's allegiance.

[10 : 14] And yet how often are we slow or reluctant to identify openly with our Savior, if not for fear of the Jews, for fear of the Scots, or for fear of our colleagues, or for fear of whoever it might be?

The next question I want to pose and give some thought to is, how did Joseph step up to the mark? How did he do that? I want to explore some of the aspects of what was involved for Joseph in

stepping up to the mark.

And in this way, challenge you to consider in what way the Lord is calling you to do likewise, to step up to the mark. And I'm going to mention, I think there's five things that we can draw from the account that we have, that we can give some thought to.

The first thing that I draw out from this story, or from this account, is that Joseph stood up to the mark alone. When he made his way to Pilate's palace on that fateful day of preparation, burdened by the devastating news of Jesus' cruel death, he walked his own Via Dolorosa alone.

This was no delegation of disciples where there was a measure of safety in numbers. No, Joseph of Arimathea approached Pilate. He stood up to the mark alone.

[11 : 38] And that fact in itself has an element of challenge for us. What about you? Is there not a task that the Lord would have you do?

It might be very different to what Joseph was doing. The circumstances and the details might be very different, but is there something that the Lord would have you do and you have to do alone? You can't do it in the company of many others. It's something only you can do. And so Joseph here would give you that prod as it were. He stood up to the mark alone.

Of course, when he did stand up to the mark alone, he discovered, as is sometimes the case, that he was not alone. He discovered that one of his colleagues on the council, Nicodemus, famous for visiting Jesus by night, as John tells us in his gospel in chapter 19 and verse 39.

Why did he do so by night? Well, for the same reason that Joseph was a secret disciple, that he wouldn't be identified. Nicodemus, he appears on the scene.

[12 : 50] And it's sometimes difficult to know the exact sequence of events, but it seems reasonable to imagine that having approached Pilate, as Joseph did, then Nicodemus appears with his own task that he's going to perform, providing the herbs and the spices that would be used to embalm Jesus.

I wonder, and I don't suppose we can know the answer to this question. I wonder if until that point Joseph and Nicodemus even knew about their shared allegiance to Jesus.

It seems reasonable to imagine that they didn't. And it was only at this point that they discover that they share this loyalty to the Savior. And isn't it sometimes like that?

I know I've heard often folk speaking about a work situation where you've been working in an office for months or maybe even longer and then discover somebody there is a Christian. And you hadn't known about it for, well, for how long?

And then a little bit of the question that is posed is, you know, why is that? Why were you or why were we so anonymous and not identified for who we are?

[14 : 06] And it is sometimes like that. When we step up to the mark in loyalty to Jesus, we discover that there are others who are doing the same.

Another aspect of the manner in which Joseph stood up to the mark that I want you to think about is that he stood up to the mark in a way that only he could do. Now, what do I mean by that?

Well, imagine if somebody else had had the same concern that Joseph had regarding the burial of Jesus. And there must have been many who shared his concern among the disciples, among his family.

You know, what is going to happen to the body of Jesus? Is it simply going to be devoured by the birds of the air and by the dogs when it's cast down from the cross?

What is going to happen to his body? That must have been a concern that others shared. And imagine if John, who was there witnessing the death of Jesus, imagine if John had said, well, I want to do something about this.

[15 : 08] And imagine if John had made his way to Pilate's palace. Do you imagine that John, a man unknown in the high elites of Jerusalem, do you imagine that John would have even got past the outer gates at Pilate's palace?

I doubt it. But Joseph was a member of the council. And so, his request for an audience is quickly transmitted to Pilate. And this is a Pilate who, I imagine, is still irritated by the unpleasant business he had reluctantly conducted that morning.

And then the message comes. There's a man who wants to speak to you. Who is he? Joseph of Arimathea. Who is he? He's a member of the council. Oh, well, I suppose.

If he's a member of the council, then I have to listen to what he has to say. And so, Joseph is able to approach Pilate in a way that perhaps so many others would have been unable to do.

Perhaps Nicodemus could have done likewise. But certainly the number of those able to do so would have been very limited. This was something that Joseph could do. And it was something that Joseph perhaps alone was able to do.

[16:28] And this reminds me, this aspect of his stepping up to the mark does remind me of Esther. Remember how her uncle Mordecai challenged Esther? And who knows, but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.

You remember the story, of course, that the Jews were in danger of being eliminated, massacred. And here was Esther, a Jew in the royal palace.

She alone could advocate for her people. And so, her uncle challenges her for such a time as this. And is it not a bit like that with Joseph of Arimathea?

For such a time as this. He could do that which others were unable to do. Now, our circumstances are, I expect, less dramatic than the circumstances of Esther and Joseph.

But how often are we in a situation where we alone have the opportunity to step up to the mark for Jesus? How often does the Holy Spirit whisper in our ear and mind for such a time as this?

[17:41] And we fail to hear or heed his voice. As I say, it might be in the most ordinary of circumstances at work or in any of our regular daily activities.

Where there is this opportunity. And the opportunity is there for you alone. Nobody else can step up to the mark. It's you who has to step up to the mark for such a time as this.

And it's also helpful to note the limited window of opportunity that Joseph had to step up to the mark. Jesus died at about three in the afternoon.

And the burial needed to be concluded by sunset. This was, as Mark tells us, preparation day. The day before the Sabbath. And the Sabbath began at sunset.

Roughly about six in the afternoon. So Jesus dies at three. And all of this has to be concluded by six. You have three hours. That's not a long time. And so this was the window that Joseph had to step up to the mark.

[18:45] Now, how easy it would have been for Joseph. Given what we know about him already. That he was a disciple of Jesus. But secretly for feet of the Jews. How easy it would have been for Joseph to dilly-dally.

To delay. To ponder. To hesitate. And say, well, is this the right thing to do? Or what's going to happen? And the minutes would have passed. And an hour would have passed.

And two hours would have passed. And the opportunity would have gone. He had this window of opportunity. And it was at this time. He couldn't wait till the following day.

He couldn't leave it till tomorrow. That was the time when he had to step up to the mark. And does that not relate to us also? Is it not true for us that there are occasions in life when we can't say, well, I'll speak to that person tomorrow.

I'll take my stand tomorrow. I'll identify with Jesus tomorrow. I'll speak of what I believe the Bible says concerning this matter tomorrow.

[19:46] No, there's a window of opportunity. And if we leave it till tomorrow, it's too late. That opportunity is gone. Joseph stood up to the mark in the time that he had to do so.

We can also notice and highlight that he stood up to the mark in the darkest of circumstances.

There's a sense in which it's perhaps not so difficult to identify with Jesus when all is well. And we're encouraged in our soul. But when all is darkness, how difficult to take the stand.

Difficult to imagine darker circumstances than these. Not only at a cosmic level, but even in the life and experience of Joseph.

Here was a man who we're told was a disciple of Jesus. A man who by his actions gives clear evidence of devotion to Jesus. And yet the one that he had imagined was the promised Messiah is dead.

[20:53] He's been crucified. And everything seems to be darkness. And in some regards, everything is darkness. These are the darkest of circumstances. This is the darkest of days.

And yet in those circumstances, Joseph steps up to the mark. And he stood up to the mark for a very tough, a very difficult task.

And we even begin to imagine what would have been involved not only in requesting the body of Jesus, but then lowering his barely recognizable corpse from the cross.

This was the man Joseph had come to love and trust. This was the man Joseph had believed was the long-awaited Messiah. Not even in his worst nightmares had he imagined that he would be

called to such an awful act of service for the Savior.

But Joseph stood up to the mark. And what about you and me? Do you shy away from loyalty to and service for your Savior when the task to hand is just too difficult?

[22 : 03] And you say, I can go this far, but no further. That's too big an ask. That is something I am not willing to do. Joseph stood up to the mark for a tough task.

And he stood up to the mark, and all of what we said really leads us up to this. And it's the final thing I want to highlight is that he stood up to the mark with courage. Mark tells us that Joseph went boldly to Pilate.

We read that there in verse 43. He went boldly to Pilate. But I think the English Standard Version translates the Greek there in a slightly different way that I think captures the sense more helpfully. In that translation, the language used is, he took courage and asked for Jesus' body. He took courage.

The reason why I think it captures it more helpfully is that the language of he went boldly could be understood as describing a very bold and brave man. And I'm not saying he wasn't bold. I'm not saying that he wasn't brave.

[23 : 06] But I think the idea of somebody who took courage, of somebody who was afraid, and yet who took courage, better captures what is happening here.

The fact that he had, until this point, followed Jesus secretly gives evidence of him being a man who was afraid. We're told he was afraid of the Jews. I don't think he suddenly was no longer afraid of the Jews.

He's still afraid of the Jews. But, even though he was afraid of the Jews, he took courage and approached Pilate and requested for Jesus' body, identifying himself in that very visible and public and dramatic way as a disciple of Jesus.

He took courage. That is what we need to do. That is what you need to do. You need to take courage. You're afraid, but you need to take courage.

You might say, well, you don't know me. You don't know if I'm afraid. You don't know if I need to take courage. But am I wrong? Think of your own circumstances, the manner in which you identify with Jesus.

[24 : 13] Am I wrong in suggesting to you that you need to take courage, that you're afraid of serving him in some way, unknown to me, but known to you, and you need to take courage.

You need to step up to the mark. Why would Joseph have been afraid? Well, the price that he would likely pay for his loyalty was a heavy one. No doubt he would have been the object of mockery.

No doubt he would have been marginalized by his erstwhile colleagues there on the council. In Mark's account, it's quite vivid how his fellow council members become very involved also at this point.

In Matthew chapter 27 and in verse 62, we read, So these are also members of the Sanhedrin.

Sir, they said, we remember that while he was still alive, that deceiver said, after three days I will rise again. So I have the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day.

[25 : 17] What tomb? The tomb in Joseph's garden. So here are his fellow council members. They're involved as well. They've discovered. They know who was involved.

They know who secured this burial. It was Joseph. Joseph, what would they think of Joseph now? Marginalized, cast into that group of disciples of the deceiver.

That's how he was now viewed by those he had previously been a colleague of. Perhaps pursued for his now revealed faith in Jesus.

We don't know what the outcome was, but it doesn't seem unreasonable to imagine. John Piper, who perhaps is best known for his book, *The Pleasures of God*, has written a poem about Joseph of Arimathea.

Let me just read one verse that captures something of what Joseph might have endured as a result of the manner in which he stood up to the mark with courage.

[26 : 21] And the poem imagines the scene of Joseph there at the cross about to bring down the body of Jesus. And he is addressed by one of the soldiers there who expresses himself in this way.

You took your stand in Pilate's court for this? Man, you're a fool. You think you'll be secure to walk the streets of Zion if you treat him like a king?

One whiff of this before the Jewish court, and they will make more vicious sport of you than him. Now, we don't know if that is what happened, but it doesn't seem unreasonable to imagine that that was what awaited Joseph of Arimathea.

Why did he step up to the mark? As we kind of draw things to a close. Why did he step up to the mark? What Joseph did was, by any reasonable measure, an act of folly.

Imagine if he had confided his intentions with a trusted fellow member of the council. What advice would he have received? A fellow member who was not a disciple of Jesus, not Nicodemus, but another one with whom he had some confidence.

[27 : 33] He said, I'm thinking of doing this. What would they have told him? They just said, don't do it, man. You're a fool. Don't do this. Don't throw your life away. Don't throw your reputation away. If you must continue as a secret disciple of this so-called Messiah, but don't do this.

This is the ultimate act of folly. Don't do it. So why did he do it? Well, I can only find one plausible answer, and it is love and devotion.

It is love and devotion that brought Joseph to this place where he stood up to the mark and went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

And of course, that is what we most need if we are to step up to the mark. Love for Jesus and devotion to his name and cause. And our love may be, and often is, tentative and timorous, but may God grant us all a sincere and growing love for our Savior.

A love that steps up to the mark. Finally, what was the outcome of Joseph stepping up to the mark? We can maybe just briefly think about this at different levels.

[28 : 48] First of all, in his own life, in the life of Joseph. Well, one thing I am sure that Joseph experienced in doing what he did was the peace of a clear conscience and the holy satisfaction that accompanies doing the right and God-pleasing thing, even and especially when it is unspeakably difficult and frightening.

I wonder if you have experienced something of that in your own life. When you stood up to the mark and did something that was difficult, out of loyalty for Jesus, the peace that follows, the holy satisfaction that comes with identifying with Jesus in the manner that we know that we ought.

But then also for Joseph, if we think only of Joseph, the joy of being honored by God is the one into whose garden the Father extends His hand to raise His Son from the grave.

Matthew explicitly identifies the garden as his own garden. The other evangelists are less clear. But on the basis of what Matthew says, what a huge privilege for Joseph.

Imagine the eternal Son of God being raised from the dead in your own garden. What joy must have accompanied that reality for Joseph of Arimathea.

[30 : 22] There's the outcome in his own life, but also in the big story of redemption. Imagine Joseph stepping up to the mark secured the fulfilling of prophecy concerning the Messiah.

We've read in Isaiah chapter 53 and verse 9 where the suffering servant, the Messiah, is spoken of. And we read, He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in His death.

He died with the wicked on either side there at Golgotha. And he was buried in the garden of a rich man. And so, Joseph, perhaps unwittingly, simply as he stood up to the mark in allegiance to Jesus, is an instrument in bringing about the fulfillment of this messianic prophecy.

Now, when we think about ourselves, I guess none of us are likely to be instruments in the fulfilling of such a specific prophecy concerning the Messiah. But as we step up to the mark for Jesus, we will, without doubt, be used by God to fulfill His eternal purposes.

For the extending of His kingdom, for the gathering in of His elect. As we take courage and do what we ought to do, God will use that for the fulfilling of His wonderful purposes.

[31 : 42] There's an outcome also in the life and mission of God's people today. And really, that's what we've been trying to do this morning. As we, instructed and inspired by Joseph, step up to the mark today and tomorrow.

So, the outcome of Joseph's courage and faithfulness is wonderfully magnified and multiplying to the glory and praise of the Jesus that He so loved and served.

And so, as we begin this week, the question that I leave you with is this. In this week that has begun, how will you step up to the mark for Jesus?

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your servants. We thank You for the honest portrayal that we have of men and women of God.

We thank You for the way in which You dignify us by giving us the opportunity to serve You, to be loyal to You, to step up to the mark for You.

[32 : 41] We confess our sin in this regard. We fall short. We often, for fear of others, fail to step up to the mark.

But we pray that You would cultivate in us an ever deeper love for Yourself and for Your Son. An ever more coherent devotion to You that is demonstrated in a life where we are enabled to step up to the mark, to take courage, and to do that which You call us to do.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.