

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA: THE MAN WHO LOANED THE TOMB
Luke 23:50-55

Ah, yes. Welcome. I'm glad you've made the effort to come see me. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Joseph. I am originally from the Judean town of Arimathea. Arimathea is not a very large town and it is not well-known...except for having been my hometown.

Not meaning to boast, honesty requires that I admit that I had become a rather prosperous man in Arimathea, a fact not lost on that old tax-collector, Matthew (Matthew 27:57). You know how those tax people are, don't you? They try to keep pretty close watch on what you earn, what you save and what you owe. And Matthew thought me rich. I...I consider myself...well, comfortable.

As sometimes happens, when a man becomes financially secure, people notice him and want him to get involved in all sorts of activities. Over the years, I'd been asked to join several organizations and to help with several projects. But the one that gave me the most satisfaction was when I was asked to become a member of The Council.

The Council, you may know it as The Sanhedrin, was the supreme judicial and administrative council among the Jews. Our ancestors formed The Council back during the time of the Maccabees. At that time, our country was under the domination of Syrian kings. These Syrians were not altogether unkind but they did not know anything about our religion, our culture or our traditions. So we sought, and received, permission to form a council of 70 of our leading men who could help to give oversight to our communities. We called this board "The Sanhedrin" but that is just a Hebrew word for "a sitting together" or "a council". So, if you don't mind too much, instead of throwing around the Hebrew term, Sanhedrin, I will just call it "The Council" - - because that is what we meant when we called it The Sanhedrin.

The Council was led by the High Priest. He plus the other 70 delegates made for a total of 71 members of The Council.

In addition to the High Priest, our members included the Chief Priests. And perhaps I should explain who the Chief Priests were. To conduct worship in the temple, which was located in Jerusalem, and to do so throughout the year, the High Priest had divided all of the serving priests into 24 groups.

Now priests were male members of the tribe or clan of Levi. That is, they were descendents of Jacob's son who was named Levi. The priests did not all live in Jerusalem, nor were they scattered evenly over the entire nation of Israel. They were consolidated into 48 cities and towns.

So the High Priest, our highest religious leader, divided the priests from these 48 towns and villages into 24 groups (or courses). Each course of priests would gather at the temple in Jerusalem for their appointed week. With only 24 courses of priests, that meant that each course was required to serve two weeks out of the year. In addition, there were high holy weeks in the year when ALL of the priests were needed to assist with worship. So added together, it worked out to each priest coming to Jerusalem five times each year so they could serve in the temple.

Well, the heads of each of these 24 courses of priests was called a Chief Priest. The Chief Priests were responsible to organize, oversee and direct the serving priests within their assigned course.

So, to go back to where I started, The Council included the High Priest and 24 chief priests. In addition, the council also included scribes. In our religion, scribes were people who carefully and laboriously hand-copied the Scriptures so that they could be made available to each synagogue and to certain prominent families.

It took a long time to copy our Scriptures by hand. It was word-by-word, letter-by-letter, stroke-by-stroke all day and every day. Scribes read from an original scroll and then copied onto a blank scroll that had been prepared to become Scripture.

There were strict rules that the scribes were required to follow when copying the Scriptures.

- They could only use clean animal skins, both to write on, and even to bind manuscripts.
- Each column of writing could have no less than forty-eight, and no more than sixty lines.
- The ink must be black, and of a special recipe.
- They must verbalize each word aloud while they were writing.
- They must wipe the pen and wash their entire bodies before writing the word "Jehovah," every time they wrote it.
- There must be a review within thirty days, and if as many as three pages required corrections, the entire manuscript had to be redone.
- The letters, words, and paragraphs had to be counted, and the document became invalid if two letters touched each other. The middle paragraph, word and letter must correspond to those of the original document.
- The documents could be stored only in sacred places (synagogues, etc).

Well, as you might imagine, these scribes had become experts in the Scriptures! They knew every book, every line, every word and every jot and tittle. (A "jot" was the tiniest letter in our alphabet. And a "tittle" was the smallest stroke required to make a letter in our alphabet. It was a little bit like the dot on your

letter “i”.) Well, my point is, these scribes were the experts on what the Scriptures said. Their job made them experts.

So the scribes were part of The Council, along with the 24 Chief Priests and the High Priest. The rest of The Council was made up of elders. Elders were prominent mature men from different towns and villages across our country.

So as you can surely see, it was a great honor to be one of the elders who was asked to be a part of The Council. It was a great honor and a grave responsibility.

In addition to being rather prosperous and prominent, I had a reputation for being principled. Quite honestly, I like to think that had more to do with my becoming an elder than the fact that my family had money. I tried to be a good man. And I tried to be an upright man.

That is part of the reason that I once ran afoul of most of the members of The Council. They were conducting a meeting to decide what to do about a Galilean named Jesus. He was from the town of Nazareth and he had created quite a stir around the country. He had claimed he was our Messiah. By that, I mean, he claimed he was the Anointed One that God had been promising to send us.

We knew that when Messiah came, he was going to be our king. If he was going to be our king, that meant we would become a sovereign nation again. We’d no longer be under the rule of the Caesar of Rome.

We had been taught that he would be a king like David was, and we all wanted a king like that again.

This Jesus had said he was that king. And he made a convincing case. He certainly seemed to have magical, almost miraculous powers. He had healed sick people. He had made the lame to walk again. He had restored the sight of blind men. He had even cleansed lepers. But then we got word that he had raised dead people back to life.

Now let me ask you: if a person with power like that does not have God’s anointing upon him, then who does? Who would?

May I tell you something that I had kept a secret? I went out to hear him, too. I went out to see him, myself. I listened to his powerful teaching and I witnessed his powerful works and I was convinced. I believed him to be Messiah. But I never said so publicly.

I had a lot to lose if I came out and declared myself to be one of his followers. I would have been dismissed from The Council because Jesus had been identified as public enemy #1 among the Jews. It would have cost me so much business

that my fortune would have dried up quickly. My family would have been ostracized and we would not have even been able to buy food in the market.

Yes, it would have cost me a lot to have come out publicly and said I was a disciple of Jesus. So I didn't.

But then came the night that The Council met and we had Jesus on trial before us. We heard the case against him. It was a weak case. In fact, it was a fabricated case. We all knew that the witnesses against him were lying. They couldn't get their stories straight until the High Priest started coaching them on what to say and how to answer. At that point, I knew that justice didn't matter that night. All that mattered was getting a guilty verdict against Jesus.

After all the charges had been filed and after all the witnesses had been questioned, the High Priest turned to Jesus and asked, "OK, Jesus. What have you to say in your own defense?" And Jesus said...nothing. NOTHING! He never said a mumbling word!! I wanted him to speak up and defend himself but he didn't. I wanted him to point out that the witnesses had contradicted one another but he wouldn't. I wanted him to say something, anything, to show that he wasn't guilty but he would not.

I was devastated. I knew what the outcome of the vote would be. And when it was taken, the vast majority voted "guilty". I voted "innocent" and when I did, the other members of The Council looked at me with rage in their eyes. In that moment, I knew I'd been right and I knew I'd been wrong.

I knew I'd been right that it would cost me everything to declare myself a follower of Jesus. And I knew I'd been wrong not to do so anyway.

So they led Jesus over to the Governor's mansion so they could try to get Pilate to impose the death penalty on Jesus. We could have a trial. We could convict or acquit. We could even punish. But we did not have the power to execute. The Romans had to do that and it was their Governor, Pilate, who would have to make that decision.

The Chief Priests, the scribes and the elders had gone out through the town and began to gather up friends and strangers. They got them to mass outside of the Governor's mansion and they began to stir them up. They told them that if this Jesus wasn't put to death, the Romans would hear that we had someone who was trying to make himself king. If that happened, the Romans would surely send in more troops and life would get worse for all of us.

The people trusted the members of The Council and figured if they said it, it must be true. So they began to shout for Jesus to be executed. I'm told that Pilate heard all of this and thought he was going to have a riot on his hands if he didn't do something.

Real quickly, he thought about a tradition we have of releasing a prisoner at the time of the Passover Feast. Pilate sent down to the prison and had the guards bring to him the most notorious, vicious criminal they could find. He was a guy named Barabbas. Pilate put him in front of us on one side of him and put Jesus on his other side and said, "Alright people. You know the tradition. I'm going to release one of these men to you. Which one do you want?" And the people started shouting, "Barabbas."

Pilate silenced the crowd and asked, "But what about this other man, Jesus. What has he done wrong?" And the people kept shouting, "We want Barabbas. We want Barabbas."

"Well," asked Pilate. "What should I do with this Jesus?"

"Crucify him," they cried. "CRUCIFY HIM!!"

Pilate finally gave up trying to reason with the mob and he told the soldiers to execute Jesus.

And so they did. They mocked him and taunted him. They beat him and battered him. They nailed him to a cross and then talked and told jokes while they watched him writhe on it. And then, when he died, the people who had watched this spectacle all went home to eat supper and celebrate Passover.

I figured that Jesus' body would be taken from the cross and then thrown on top of the city dump, a place called Gehenna. He deserved better than that. So I went to the Governor and asked if I could bury Jesus. Pilate said I could so I took his body from the cross and got ready to take it to my own family tomb. It was a new tomb and none of the family had yet been buried there so I figured it would be alright. I'd talk with them about it later and tell them what I had done.

While I was getting the body down from the cross and while I was struggling with the weight of it, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was another member of The Council. A man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus told me that he had been a disciple of Jesus, too. Had been for years. But he never told anyone because he figured it would cost him too much to say so. I nodded knowingly. And I gratefully accepted Nicodemus' help.

We got the body down, did a quick job of wrapping it in cloths with a few spices to cover the smell of decay that would surely soon set in. And then, together, we took Jesus' body to my tomb and laid it inside. When we prepared to leave, we rolled a large stone before the door so no animals could get in and ravage his body.

Later, I learned that Pilate posted a guard at the tomb to make sure no human animals disturbed the body, either.

I had been so ashamed that I had let personal interests and professional ambition keep me from acknowledging that I believed in him and that I loved him. But I was grateful I'd had the chance to change that and to do something practical for him by giving him my tomb. Well, I said, "giving him my tomb." I guess I didn't really give it to him. I only loaned it to him...for the weekend. But that, as someone was to say, is the rest of the story. And the rest of the story will have to wait for another day...for a new day!

INVITATION: #315:1-3 – *"Were You There?"*