

I am one of the few people mentioned in all four gospels. Even Jesus' father does not have that privilege, although we share the same name. I am Joseph of Arimathea, and I have the unusual distinction of being a minor Bible character of whom you know more about than almost every other person in the Gospels besides Jesus himself.

As Matthew tells you that I was very rich, came from Arimathea, was a disciple of Jesus, went to Pilate to get the body of Jesus, wrapped the body of Jesus in a linen cloth, laid Jesus' dead body in my own new tomb, and rolled a giant stone over the tomb's entrance.¹

Mark says I was a prominent member of the Council, I was waiting for the Kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body, and was given it. I took down the body, wrapped it in linen, placed it in a tomb, and rolled a stone over the entrance.²

Luke adds the information that I was good and upright, I had not consented to the decision and action to crucify Jesus, I came from Judea, and that the tomb was new.³

John completes my information by saying that I was a secret disciple of Jesus because I feared the Jewish leaders, that I was accompanied by Nicodemus when I prepared the body of Jesus, that he and I wrapped the body in spices in accordance with Jewish customs, and that the tomb was in a garden where Jesus had been crucified.⁴ John adds that we laid the body in the tomb on the day of Preparation.

I tell you all of this detail for a very specific reason. I am uniquely qualified to tell you about the last day of Jesus' life. When you hear my story, you will also guess where the writers of the Gospels got some of their detailed information.

I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, the child of a wealthy Jewish merchant. When I was young, my family moved from Arimathea to a large house on Mount Zion, only a few hundred yards west of the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, we could walk straight east from my house, cross the bridge you know as Wilson's Arch, and enter the Temple grounds our treasured,

¹ Matthew 27:57-59

² Mark 15:43-45

³ Luke 23:50-53

⁴ John 19:38-42

custom-made robes billowing...without having to mingle with poor people or be bothered by beggars.

My father was a Sadducee, as were many of the other wealthy Jewish leaders. We were very socially concerned, didn't believe in the resurrection, and not overly concerned with intricate theological arguments. Although we didn't believe in the resurrection, we did believe that the Messiah would restore Israel to its rightful powerful position among the countries of the world. We looked for a Messiah that would restore King David's earthly power... (wryly) although that power had not really existed for nearly a thousand years.

Since we were wealthy, I went to school and studied the Torah with other wealthy children. Sometimes, exceptionally bright children, such as Saul of Tarsus, joined our group, but mostly I knew rich people. Rich people came to our house for dinner, and my parents' friends were all powerful. Wealth was much more important to us than having perfect theology. We paid poor rabbis to be concerned about theology for us, just as some of you modern people pay your preachers to think about theology for you.

Almost a week before the death of Jesus, I learned that he and his disciples were in town. I rushed to go hear the famous teacher, and found that he was surrounded by people of all kinds. Naturally, I gravitated to stand by my friends, other rich, and very richly-attired, Jews. We looked like gaudy peacocks next to poorly-clad Jesus and his rag-tag disciples. We rich, religious Jewish leaders loved our robes.

The more Jesus taught, the more I believed. The more Jesus taught, the angrier my friends became. They grew louder, and I grew quieter. They asked him loaded questions, and he turned back every verbal challenge. The people loved watching Jesus take on the religious establishment, and I did, too. I so badly wanted to hear Jesus, and my robes kept me safe from suspicion. I wasn't paying attention to the storm that was brewing.

I started hearing rumors that one of Jesus' followers had taken a bribe to betray him to the Jewish leaders.⁵ It sounded so silly. Why would such powerful men be afraid of a homeless preacher?

On Thursday night, I celebrated Passover with my entire family. Like other rich people, we had a choice lamb, and used expensive cups and plates. I have to admit that while the service was going on, I didn't notice any difference in it and the many others I had attended in my life. My life was as normal as could be. Until about midnight, when nothing in my world would ever be the same.

There was a loud, crashing knock on my front door. I jumped out of bed, threw on the nearest robe. My servants and I arrived at the door at the same time. There were many of my friends holding torches. They shouted for me to get dressed and come with them. There was an

⁵ Matthew 26:14-16

emergency, and the Sanhedrin was going to meet. It must be quite an emergency, I thought. The Sanhedrin almost never met at night since their decisions had to be made during daylight.

We entered the Sanhedrin building, I understood the commotion. They were afraid of Jesus. They wanted to kill him because they were afraid of him. Nothing was going to stop that bloodthirsty mob. But they had no authority to kill him! That's the knowledge I consoled myself with anyway. They only had legal authority to beat him before letting him go. I settled in for a long trial, and that is what I got.

Witness after witness, their testimonies conflicted or were patently false, but they kept calling them. Out of frustration, the leaders called to take Jesus to Pilate and ask for a sentence of death. It was daybreak, almost everybody in the room voted yes, but not me. I was too cowardly to object, but I did not vote for it. I was sure that Pilate would see his innocence and let Jesus go. I knew Pilate from some of my business dealings, and I knew him to be a smart, honest man. He was so stubborn that he would never give in to the demands of the Jewish leaders.

The sun rose, we took Jesus before Pilate, and our leaders asked to have Pilate crucify him. He had the authority to kill Jesus, but they did not. Pilate was known to crucify people for a lot less reason than appeasing the Jews, but he still was an honorable man. Jesus was tried before Pilate, and I heard the precious words from Pilate. "I find no guilt in this man."

That should have been the end of it. Pilate should have given him a light beating and let Jesus go. But he could not withstand the threats and pressure from the Jewish Leaders, so he sent Jesus to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, for further examination hoping the whole mess would go away.

Herod Antipas tried to question Jesus, but Jesus just ignored his questions. Rather than be humiliated in front of everyone, Herod Antipas quickly sent him back to Pilate.

Pilate repeatedly tried to release Jesus, but the leaders' threats kept coming and coming. He had Jesus savagely beaten hoping to satisfy the Jewish leaders, but that just inflamed them more. If Pilate would not kill Jesus, they would cause a riot among the people and Pilate might lose his job. He gave in. Finally, Pilate gave in, he gave the order. Crucify Jesus.

I could not believe it. The hate from the Jewish leaders was enough to kill an innocent man. I had done nothing to stop the travesty, and it was too late now to do anything. The fate of Jesus was sealed. He was going to be crucified and would most assuredly die a gruesome death.

I was humiliated, and scared, for me and for my people. We weren't sending a guilty man to his death, and there were few things that made God angrier than the shedding of the blood of an innocent man...especially if that innocent man turned out to be the very Son of God. Like the prophets before me, I prayed for my people and for myself.

Some of the Jewish leaders followed Jesus to Golgotha where he would be murdered, but most of us went to our homes...Shamefully. There was every reason for God to end our lives that day. As the hours passed and the sky darkened, and an earthquake happened, I believed we were all going to die. And we deserved to. A messenger came to my house and told me that the massive curtain, 60 feet high, and thick (he will gesture to about 4-5") massive curtain in the Temple had been torn in half. From top to bottom. I knew that only God could have done such a thing! God had abandoned his Temple and would never return.

I could not stand it any longer. I rushed out of my house, followed by a few of my most dedicated servants. In less than fifteen minutes, I reached a horrific scene. Three men hanging on crosses. As usual, they were placed next to a major road where people could see them, eye-to-eye, jeer at them, and be reminded of the absolute power of Rome.

Jesus was barely recognizable, but he was the one in the middle. Above his head was Pilate's sarcastic sign, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." There was a small crowd of women nearby, staring at Jesus. But unlike typical Jewish women, they were praying instead of wailing.

I rushed up, just as a Roman soldier jammed his spear in Jesus' side. Involuntarily, from somewhere deep within me, I don't know where, a scream emerged but I kept it in. I couldn't let something like that happen...with who I was, and what I represented. No. Then, I watched in morbid fascination as blood and water shot from the hole in his side.

1. (extended pause as Joseph whole demeanor makes a pivot, right in front of us as he relives the moment to the point of looking down as if he's looking at his robes. He looks back up, he's different.)

He didn't feel the spear. Jesus was already dead. With his death, my fear of who I was, and what I was becoming, and the difference between them died, too. Just vanished. I nodded to an officer who stood nearby, and instructed him to follow me to Pilate. He was afraid to abandon his post, but he was more afraid of a wild-eyed rich Jew with unknown intentions headed to see his boss.

On the way, I realized that both Pilate and the Jewish leaders had a big, big problem. What would they do with the body of Jesus? Romans typically left the bodies of the crucified to rot on the cross as a deterrent to future criminals. But Pilate would be ashamed to have that body stay in the public eye since he knew Jesus was innocent.

The Jewish leaders were obligated to have the body buried within twenty-four hours after death, but they wanted to disassociate themselves from Jesus' death and just have the whole matter go away quietly.

When my small entourage reached Pilate's garden, I just walked in. I guess Pilate's body guards thought the officer with me was under orders to report, plus they were familiar with me from my past dealings with Pilate. When I entered the room, Pilate just gave me a questioning look. I

said, "Please, give me the body of the innocent man." The officer confirmed that Jesus was dead, and Pilate gave his body to me. I'm sure Pilate was appreciative that I was removing a sign of his shameful action.

Back we went to Golgotha, where the officer instructed his soldiers to remove the dead Jesus from the cross. I was sickened by the thought of them ripping his hands and feet from the nails, so my servants and I removed him from the cross. I then sent one servant to fetch linen cloth, and other servants to buy burial spices and perfumes. They had only an hour to buy those things because sundown was approaching, and the burial had to happen soon.

My servants gone, I was in a quandary. What would I do next? There was a muffled cough behind me, I turned around. Nicodemus. It was my friend, Nicodemus, another secret follower of Jesus. I said, "My new tomb is over there. We will carry him."

The blood drops of Jesus stained our robes our expensive, pompous, (he searches for a word, he's overcome)...robes that now, would never be washed. We reached the opening of the tomb, my servants began to arrive. Nicodemus and I personally prepared the body with the spices, and then carefully wrapped it with linen strips. We placed the headpiece over his face and head, and laid him down. With one last look, we left the tomb. It took six of us to lever the stone in place over the tomb face, where we sealed it. It would take a dozen strong men to remove that stone, because I had designed it that way.

Nicodemus and I were ritually unclean because we had touched a dead body. We would not be able to celebrate Passover, but neither of us really cared. Jesus was dead, and our hopes and dreams were shattered. We were no longer secret followers of Jesus, and would likely lose our seats on the Sanhedrin and our places in high society, and may lose much of our wealth. Standing there in our blood-stained robes, they seemed like treasures that no longer had any value.