

The Chief Justice

Conversions at Calvary – Part III

Selected Scripture

Introduction

When the blinders of spiritual death fall away by the grace of God, everything that a person once denied about God, they now believe. It is indeed an absolute reversal of mind and heart; a complete turn-around brought about by saving faith.

Let me begin today by showing a rather creative illustration of what we will call “the great reversal”. In this illustration, a young man will read several sentences in descending order, and then the script will stop. After this, he will begin to read the same sentences with different punctuation in reverse, in ascending order, and the message will have an entirely different meaning.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIC5aystO8>

Through the drama of biblical events, we have watched a great reversal take place in the lives of some of the most unlikely converts to Christ.

First we observed the criminal hanging on his own cross next to Jesus. At first, this criminal hurled insults at Christ along with another criminal also dying an excruciating death by crucifixion. However, something happened and the eyes of this dying thief were opened. He then said,

. . . “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!” (Luke 23:42)

This was his personal reversal. This criminal went from insulting Christ to worshiping Christ; from mocking Christ to making Christ his Lord.

After this, darkness fell and great, powerful statements were made by Christ. This fulfilled scripture and undeniably placed Jesus as the atoning sacrifice, paying the penalty in full for the sins of the world as the capable and final Passover Lamb.

The Roman centurion and his soldiers had seen a lot of men die. Thirty thousand men had already been crucified in this region by the Roman Empire.

These soldiers had seen it all – until they saw *this* Man die. As Christ commended His Spirit into the hands of God the Father, this centurion made a complete reversal and said,

*. . . “Truly this was the Son of God!”
(Matthew 27:54)*

Imagine this scene. We place our faith in a living Savior; these two men were placing their faith in a dying Savior.

The criminal turns from insulting Christ to announcing that Christ is the King of a coming kingdom.

The centurion turns from apathy toward Christ to announcing that Christ is the Son of the living God.

The blinders came off and the king of darkness lost two more to the King of light.

This is the glorious reversal of regeneration! We have seen it take place in the lives of a criminal and a centurion, and we will see it occur in one more life today – a chief justice.

Of these three men, the chief justice is the only one named in the Bible. His name was Joseph (Luke 23:50), and he will appear seemingly out of nowhere. He was there all along, we just were not aware of it.

Joseph was hiding even though he had been out in public. He even reached a point at which he believed Jesus was the Messiah, but had not told anyone yet. No one knew it. It will be the cross that brings him to an open display of his faith in Christ – and it will be one more incredible reversal.

Joseph is described for us in all four Gospels. Let us turn to Luke’s gospel account and use that as home base. Look at chapter 23, beginning at verse 50.

And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man

(he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God;

This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain.

(Luke 23:50-53)

The Chief Justice Who Converted at Calvary

Luke gives at least three descriptive phrases to introduce us to this man Joseph.

1. First, Joseph had a highly respected position.

Luke writes that Joseph,

*. . . was a member of the Council . . .
(Luke 23:50a)*

This is a reference to the Sanhedrin – the supreme court of Israel – which was composed of seventy men. These men were sometimes referred to as the rulers over the people.

Mark’s gospel informs us that Joseph was not only a member of the Sanhedrin, but . . .

*. . . a prominent member of the Council . . .
(Mark 15:43)*

In other words, Joseph was not only a chief justice in Israel’s supreme court, but was one of the most highly respected men among them.

What Joseph said carried great weight. He was a ruler with great influence and power among the people, which only adds to the tragic irony of his life when we realize he had said nothing in defense of Christ.

Notice that Luke writes,

. . . [Joseph] had not consented to their plan and action . . . (Luke 23:51)

However, this does not mean he had defended Christ.

John’s gospel reveals the reason Joseph, and evidently others in the Sanhedrin, kept quiet.

Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue;

for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

(John 12:42-43).

In other words, they did not want to lose their reputations and the approval of men, which could also be worded, “the glory of men”.

They were more interested in the glory of men than the glory of God. Had they confessed faith in Christ, they would have been excommunicated from the synagogue – the very center of Jewish life and worship.

John writes in verse 42,

. . . they were not confessing [Christ] . . .

The tense of the verb “confessing” indicates that they were actually shrinking away – more and more as time went on – from openly confessing their belief in Christ.ⁱ

While we are told that there were rulers who loved the approval of man more than the approval of God, John later adds an insight into the biography of Joseph by telling us that Joseph had become . . .

. . . a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews . . . (John 19:38)

Evidently Joseph had heard Jesus teach; he had perhaps witnessed a miracle or two. It is also possible that he first heard Jesus preach when he and others had come to ask difficult questions in an attempt to trick Him and condemn Him.ⁱⁱ

Joseph had more than likely seen every attempt to trip Jesus up fail. More importantly, he had heard the wise responses from Christ. He knew that only God’s anointed One could teach and heal with the authority of God. He had to be the Messiah!

Joseph had become a disciple – a follower of Christ.

However, Joseph also knew the Jewish leaders were envious of Christ’s popularity and were bent on destroying Him (Mark 14:1).

The shouts of “Hosanna” had quickly diminished. The crowd had gone from shouting “Crown Him” to “Crucify Him” (Matthew 21:15).

These were dangerous times.

Peter could have gotten his own cross had he not denied the Savior. Besides John, all the other disciples had run for their lives. In fact, after Christ’s burial they would all be hiding,

. . . for fear of the Jews . . . (John 20:19)

This is the same phrase used for Joseph.

So if we are not too hard on Peter, Andrew, Matthew, and James, then let us not be so quick to lower the hammer on Joseph. He is one of the

prominent chief justices of Israel who would appear to have a lot more at stake than mere fishermen.

The truth is that you might be in the same boat, so to speak.

- This is the Christian high school student who sits in a class in which the teacher says, “Raise your hand if you actually believe that God created everything,” and their hand stays down.
- This is the Christian college student who turns down an invitation to a party and when asked why, says they are just not feeling well.
- This is the individual who is invited to go golfing on Sunday, but instead of saying they are going to church, responds that they are just not that good a golfer (which might be the truth, but is not the reason).
- This is the business person who is asked, along with all the other employees, to go through company diversity training in which the trainer asks, “Is there anyone here who believes in the biblical view that homosexuality is wrong?” – and remains quiet.
- This is the average Christian in America who has yet to tell anyone in their world that they belong to Jesus Christ.

I remember standing in a visitation line waiting to greet the family members of a deceased man who was well known in our community. Standing in front of me was a believer I knew, although he attended another church. While we were standing there I asked this man if the deceased was a believer, and tears came to his eyes as he said, “You know, we worked together and took road trips together, but I never told him I was a Christian and God just never came up.”

Joseph did not consent to the plan of the Sanhedrin – which meant he abstained from voting – but he kept his hand down!

We are told not only that Joseph had a respected position, but we are given a second description as well.

2. Secondly, Joseph had a godly reputation.

Luke writes that Joseph was,

. . . a good and righteous man . . .
(*Luke 23:50b*)

He is the only man Luke ever calls “good”.

If power corrupts, Joseph had sidestepped the temptation. Adding to the other clues we have about him, we discover he was rich and connected well enough to Pilate to be granted a private audience. In other words, he had every opportunity to not be good.

Joseph was at the top of the food chain. When a good man gets to the top, we usually watch him go from good to bad, from selfless to selfish, from compassionate to callous.

What was it that kept Joseph in check and protected his character?

Joseph had a prominent position and a godly reputation. Let us look at one more portrayal that might explain his character.

3. Thirdly, Joseph was living with a heavenly expectation.

Notice the third descriptive phrase from Luke.

. . . [Joseph] was waiting for the kingdom of God (Luke 23:51b)

Joseph was literally longing for the time of spiritual renewal, national repentance, and the rule and reign of God’s Anointed.

What governed his life was not his position, his wealth, or his reputation. What mattered most to Joseph was God.

However, when the “Crown Him” turned into “Crucify Him,” Joseph’s world began to crumble.

We have every reason to believe that Joseph fully anticipated Jesus Christ fulfilling the Messianic role of overthrowing world rulers and establishing His kingdom on earth. Like many Jews in his day, and even today, he did not understand the difference between Messiah’s first coming to suffer, and His second coming as sovereign. Joseph had planned, no doubt, to eventually come forward as one of Christ’s disciples – as soon as Christ established the throne of David.

“I’ll make my faith known publicly then,” he thought! “It isn’t the right time now. It’s too dangerous. I’ll just wait a little longer.”

Now, however, everything had changed. Christ was on a cross and death was only moments away. Joseph was perhaps among the Sanhedrinists who had come to Golgotha to mock and curse Him.

Joseph had remained silent, of course – as always. He may have stayed through the entire ordeal and, as soon as he saw Christ die, knew exactly what he would do.

The cross was, for Joseph, the crossroads between silent Christianity and courageous

Christianity. It was, for him, the defining moment; the great reversal of a lifestyle that would now publicly mark him as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Luke tells us that Joseph immediately . . .

. . . went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. (Luke 23:52)

While the priests are rushing to inform the high priest and Sanhedrin that the curtain has been torn in two, opening the Holy of Holies to everyone, Joseph is rushing to the Roman Governor.

The high priest is red in the face and commanding the priests to go sew the curtain back up, which they evidently did to keep their now defunct religion on life support.

The temple would be destroyed in A.D. 70, and will not be reconstructed until the Tribulation.

The Sanhedrin then staggers underneath another piece of devastating news. One of their own – one of their most prominent members – has declared his belief in Jesus and is taking Him to be buried in his own family tomb. This cannot be!

Do not miss this – as soon as the body of Jesus is requested by Joseph, the entire religious world is thrown into an uproar! This is front page news. The headlines will read,

- Chief Justice vindicates False Messiah
- Sanhedrinist sides with Condemned
- Turncoat on the Supreme Court

There is no turning back. Secrecy has been shattered by this public statement. Joseph will not allow Jesus to be left like a criminal, but will bury Him like a King.

The great reversal has taken place:

- from secrecy to testimony;
- from spectating to participating;
- from cowardice to courage.

Joseph had thought about this long enough – it was time to act.

God has already used a man named Joseph to guard the birth of the Messiah. Now, God will use another man named Joseph to guard the burial of the Messiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Chief Justice's Burial of the Savior

Now, why would the kind of burial that only a man like Joseph could provide be so important?

1. First, the burial that Joseph provided for Jesus was important because the scriptures declared an unusual prophecy that Christ would be buried with the rich.

This would be highly unlikely. Jesus Christ was the adopted son of a poor migrant worker. He Himself would be a carpenter until the age of thirty and then He would die three years later.

Jesus owned nothing!

He did not own a home of His own and had no permanent address where He could pillow His head at night.

Christ borrowed everything He used in His ministry – a boat, a guest room, a cup to drink water from a Samaritan well, a colt to ride into Jerusalem upon, an upper room in which to meet, an outdoor garden in which to pray, and a temporary tomb in which to lie.

Jesus was poor. Yet, Isaiah prophesied,

. . . He [will be] with a rich man in His death... (Isaiah 53:9)

So He was – with Joseph. The scriptures were fulfilled even in the financial standing of the man who buried Jesus.

2. Secondly, the burial that Christ was given by Joseph protected His body from being broken and torn apart.

The Romans controlled the crucifixion, and they controlled the body and its disposal.^{iv}

The prophecy of Psalm 34:20 makes it clear that none of Christ's bones would be broken. It would become one more identification of Christ with the Passover lambs that were to be sacrificed without the breaking of any bones.

The Romans had absolutely no respect for the corpses of criminals, and they were often left to wild dogs and vultures to dispose of.^v

The bodies of criminals were seldom buried at all, but were simply taken off their crosses and left on the hill for scavenging animals.

One author wrote that Golgotha was named the Place of the Skull simply because it was littered with the skulls from previous crucifixions.^{vi}

It is also just as likely that the body of Jesus could have been taken by the Jewish leaders to the Valley of Hinnom. This is where perpetual fires were kept burning and unclaimed bodies as well as criminal corpses could be thrown and burned. It was also called the Valley of Ashes or The Valley of Corpses.

It is this valley that Christ often used as an illustration for the fires of hell. It would have pleased the religious leaders more than anything else to have taken Christ's body to the place He used as an illustration of hell and throw Him in. In the process, they would not only have broken His bones, but would have allowed His body to be burned and desecrated.

Joseph kept this from happening!

3. Thirdly, the grave that Joseph provided for Christ would serve as confirmation of Christ's death.

The Roman seal would have confirmed that not only was this the grave where Christ was buried, but that the grave was occupied by a dead body.

The Romans would not have released the body without confirming that Christ was dead. In fact, Pilate made sure He was dead by receiving confirmation from the centurion himself (Mark 15:44-45).

All of this would add to the credibility of the witnesses of Christ's resurrection. This was the tomb; the soldiers did not have the wrong address!

There would be no denying that this was the place; witnesses could attest to the fact that they had seen Christ taken in there as a dead man, and later He was gone!

All of this was a mountain of evidence that Jesus Christ had truly died.

A woman once wrote J. Vernon McGee, a radio Bible preacher who is now with the Lord, and said, "Dr. McGee, my pastor preached last Sunday that Jesus didn't really die, but that He just swooned – or fainted – and the disciples simply revived Him later."

McGee wrote back, "Dear Madam, I recommend you whip your pastor at least forty times, jam a crown of thorns down on his head, nail him through his hands and feet to a cross, run a spear up under his ribs and through his heart, take him down and wrap him tightly with a covering of one hundred pounds of spices, leave him for three days in an airless tomb, and then see if he can be revived."

The fact that Joseph acted with unusual courage and gave public testimony of association with his Lord as one of His disciples allowed for:

- the fulfillment of scripture in Christ's burial by a rich man;
- the protection of Christ's body from being broken;
- the confirmation of Christ's death.

There is one more matter of importance in this burial of Christ provided by Joseph.

4. Fourthly, Joseph's tomb would serve as a witness to Christ's resurrection.

The stone covering the tomb was not literally thrown off the track by angels to let Christ out, but to let people in. On resurrection Sunday everyone could come and see that the tomb was empty.

Keep in mind, however, that the tomb was not really empty, was it? Something had been left behind that was so incredible and strange that it caused John the Apostle to believe that Christ had risen from the dead when he saw it.

Had Jesus been buried by a poor man, He would have been wrapped quickly after a simple bath in linen strips. However, this did not happen in this burial by rich Joseph of Arimathea. In fact, the Gospel of John, chapter 19, informs us that Nicodemus helped Joseph prepare the body with expensive spices – one hundred pounds in all. This would have cost the average man a lifetime of savings.

Linen sheets would be torn into strips. As the body was wrapped – arms and legs and then the entire body – the overlapping edges of the linen would be coated with spices – some dry and some made into a sticky paste that would cause the linen strips to adhere to one another and stay in place. The end result would look the way we picture a mummy. Several days go by, which allow the gummy spices to harden and create a shell of linen around the body.

When John arrived at the tomb that Sunday, he rushed in and saw the grave clothes – the linen wrappings – still lying there in the form of a body; that is, like an empty cocoon.

... and [John] believed. (John 20:8)

It would have been slightly caved in at the midsection, but there was no opening, no evidence of tearing or ripping, no sign of a struggle – just empty.

Had you been there as the body of Jesus was raised and glorified on the third day, you would not have seen Him struggle to sit up and unwrap the linen strips one by one or just burst them apart. That would have been evidence of a resuscitation, not a resurrection, and the linen would have been scattered everywhere.

Instead, in a courageous disciple's family tomb, is a cocoon – and the Conqueror of death has obviously vanished.

This family tomb was Joseph's public testimony of faith. Like the dying thief, he also was waiting for

the coming kingdom. Although they did not know how it was to be accomplished, perhaps Joseph and Nicodemus had scoured the Messianic prophecies during these days and re-read that the anointed Messiah would not experience decay (Psalm 16:10).

It is possible they believed a resurrection would occur, and that this tomb would only be needed by Christ temporarily.

Conclusion

Notice the irony in the fact that the disciples who had openly followed Jesus during His ministry ran away at the end, but [one] who had kept [his] faith silent while Christ was alive came forward publicly [only after the Lord died].^{vii}

Do not miss what all of this meant to Joseph. Life for him would never be the same.

As a result of being in contact with a dead body, Joseph would have been defiled and ceremonially unclean. This would have caused him to miss celebrating Passover, the most important festival for the Jewish people.

Could it be that he no longer cared? Could it be that he knew Passover was now a shadow of past traditions and that Christ, the final Passover Lamb, was now his only celebration?

In addition, the Jewish leaders had already threatened to excommunicate any man from the synagogue who confessed belief in Jesus as Messiah (John 9:22).^{viii}

Not only was Joseph ceremonially defiled and unable to celebrate the Passover, but on the following Sabbath he would more than likely have found that he and his family were barred from the synagogue.

It was required for members of the Sanhedrin to be married. There is no mention of Joseph's wife in this drama, but we can count on the fact that Joseph changed her life forever as well.

Still further, Joseph would have been defrocked and dismissed from the supreme court of Israel by the high priest and others he had openly defied by his statement of faith.

For what purpose did he do this?

Understand that Joseph had united with a ruined cause. As far as the religious leaders and the populace at large would have thought, one of the most respected men in the land had taken a stand for a false Messiah, and an obviously failed Messiah who now occupied a tomb.^{ix}

Like the thief on the cross who demonstrated faith in a dying Savior, Joseph identified with a dead Savior. This man who had been too afraid to say anything about his faith in Christ now says everything.

Why?

The blinders had been taken off – first for the criminal, then for the centurion, and now for the chief justice.

They did not know everything, but they knew Jesus Christ was the Son of the living God, the Messiah – the anointed and promised Deliverer. Now they cared most about allegiance to Him.

Oswald Chambers, in his classic work, wrote, “The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else; but if you do not fear God you will fear everything else.”^x

When you observe the life of a man like Joseph, unbeliever, what is needed in your life today?”

A reversal: from unbelief to belief.

Claim Christ as your Messiah today. Do not put it off, do not wait – do it now.

Perhaps, Christian, you need a reversal:

- from spectating to participating;
- from secrecy to giving testimony;
- from cowardice to courage;
- from apathy to action.

No matter what your friends, family, colleagues, or classmates will say, take your stand for Christ and take steps forward with Christ.

I love that rather humorous proverb that puts it this way:

He who deliberates only before taking a step will spend his entire life on one leg.^{xi}

Start moving.

Joseph evidently did.

While he disappears from scripture, tradition has tracked his discipleship under the tutelage of the Philip, one of the early deacons of the Jerusalem church. You may remember that Philip was the disciple in Acts, chapter 8, who was sent by the Spirit to lead an Ethiopian, who was riding in a chariot, to Christ.

According to tradition, Joseph was trained and eventually sent as a missionary to England. He supposedly landed in A.D. 61 and settled in Glastonbury where he served for the rest of his life.^{xii}

While we do not know if this is true, what we do know from history is that one of the first Christian assemblies in England, dedicated to the gospel of Jesus Christ, was established in Glastonbury.

What we *do know* for certain from scripture is that this once secret disciple, who was filled with fear, became a courageous testimony to the gospel of the dying, buried, resurrected Lord.

ⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 249.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Matthew: Volume 4 (Moody Press, 1989), p. 294.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Phillips, Exploring the Gospel of Matthew (Loizeaux, 1999), p. 528.

^{iv} Trent C. Butler, Holman New Testament Commentary: Luke (Holman Publishers, 2000), p. 398.

^v William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 289.

^{vi} William Barclay, The Gospel of Mark (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 366.

^{vii} MacArthur, p. 296.

^{viii} R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel (Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), p. 1136.

^{ix} R. Kent Hughes, Mark: Volume Two (Crossway Books, 1989), p. 214.

^x Oswald Chambers, The Highest Good, quoted in Christianity Today, vol. 39, no. 1.

^{xi} Leadership, vol. 11, no. 2.

^{xii} Barclay, Luke, p. 290.