

“Coming out of the closet.” It’s used to refer to someone who comes out publicly about something they’d previously kept hidden. It’s used most often of those who come out of the closet sexually, as when people publicly identify themselves as gay or lesbian. It’s also been used of those in liberal dominated institutions like academia and the entertainment industry who come out of the closet to identify themselves as “conservative.”

This morning we’re going to meet a couple of men who “come out of the closet” – not sexually or ideologically, but spiritually. And they did so at the moment when it was the most difficult. Their names are Joseph and Nicodemus. And they chose to publicly identify with Jesus at a very tense time – immediately after the public execution of Jesus – an execution that brought delight to the peers of Joseph and Nicodemus.

Let’s meet these two men who demonstrate faith and courage.

#### [Turn to John 19]

The death of Jesus seems to have impacted them greatly – and cemented in their hearts and minds the impact that His life and teaching was having on them.

Last week we saw how details of the death of Jesus were fulfilling Scriptures – and that Jesus is the Lamb of God whose death results in forgiveness and eternal spiritual life for those who follow Him. And we also learned that the Jewish leaders were in a hurry to get Jesus buried so as to not defile the Sabbath. That meant He’d have to be buried quickly, which provides the opportunity for a couple of His followers to come out of the closet to openly identify with Jesus.

So after Jesus’ death was confirmed by the Roman soldiers, we read:

#### Read vs.38

\* <sup>38</sup> **After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body.**

Claiming the body of Jesus was a bold and courageous move. The more we consider *what* Joseph and Nicodemus did, *and the climate* in which they did it, the more we can appreciate their courage.

We start with Joseph. What does John tell us about him? He’s described as \* **Joseph of Arimathea**, which suggests he was born in the town of Arimathea, located about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem, just east of the seaport city of Joppa.

What else does John reveal about Joseph?

#### Read vs.38b

\* <sup>38</sup> **...being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one***

Joseph was a **secret disciple**. You could say that he was a “closet Christian.” He bought into *who* Jesus was and *what* Jesus taught...but **secretly**. He was hesitant to publicly identify with Jesus.

Why was he hesitant? Why was Joseph a **secret disciple**?

#### Read vs.38c

\* <sup>38</sup> **... for fear of the Jews,**

It was because he **feared the Jews**. And who were “**the Jews**” John is referring to here? And why would he fear them?

**The Jews** in this context refers to the Jewish leadership – the Jewish Council – the Sanhedrin – of which Joseph was a member!

#### [Turn to Mark 15]

#### Read Mark 15:43

\* <sup>43</sup> **Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.**

Joseph was a **prominent member of the Council**. That meant he was one of the 70 members of the Sanhedrin – the supreme ruling Council over Jewish affairs. That was the same Council who pushed for the crucifixion of Jesus – the same council who, as we saw in our study of Acts, would continue to harass *the followers of* Jesus.

And Joseph wasn’t just a *member* of the council, he was a **prominent member** of the Council. He was a distinguished, notable member of an elite group, the most powerful in Judaism. And Matthew 27:57 further indicates, he was a wealthy man, which likely contributed to his prominence.

So when John tells us Joseph was a secret disciple **for fear of the Jews**, it means he was living in fear of his own colleagues – his fellow members **of the Council**. Peer pressure had been keeping him in the closet. The council was on

record as despising Jesus – which made it difficult for one who was intrigued by Jesus.

One thing that seems to have set him apart from the majority of his peers is his sense of spiritual expectancy – he was \* **waiting for the kingdom of God**. He was anticipating – even yearning for – the coming Messiah and the establishment of His kingdom. And sometime during the ministry of Jesus, Joseph concluded that Jesus was the One for whom he was waiting.

Luke *also* gives us insight the kind of man Joseph was. While confirming what we've already learned, Luke adds further insight:

**Read Luke 23:50,51**

\* <sup>50</sup> **And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man** <sup>51</sup> **(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;**

He was a **good and righteous man**. His faith in Jehovah influenced his life. He lived his faith out in daily life. He was a man of character.

Luke also informs us that Joseph was not in agreement with the majority of the Council – he \* **had not consented to their plan and action**. Joseph was not in agreement with the decision of the Council to push for the death of Jesus. That's why John describes him as a **secret disciple**. And you can probably imagine how hard it would be to be a *lover* of Jesus among *haters* of Jesus. Maybe you don't have to imagine that. Maybe you've already been there – maybe you *are currently* there. You may know all too well how hard it is to stand out from the crowd – especially a crowd of your peers – whether they be fellow students, neighbors, or coworkers.

It hadn't been easy for Joseph. But he refused to go along with the Council. As Luke put it: he **had not consented to their plan and action**. How that failure to go along with them manifested itself, we do not know. Perhaps he wasn't at their latest sinister, early morning meeting. Or perhaps if he was there, he did not voice agreement with their actions. Or perhaps he even verbally objected. We don't know for sure whether his lack of consent was manifested by refraining from speaking up, or by speaking up. But we *do* know he did *not* support their actions.

Another thing we know is that Joseph was not alone on the Council in his belief in Jesus, nor in his attempt to give Jesus a proper burial:

**Read John 19:39a**

\* <sup>39</sup> **Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came,**

**Nicodemus** and Joseph had something in common. Up until that point, it seems both of them had been somewhat secretive or reserved in their commitment to Jesus.

Nicodemus first appeared in John's account in John 3, as the man **who had first come to Him by night**.

[Turn to John 3]

**Read 3:1,2**

\* <sup>1</sup> **Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;** <sup>2</sup> **this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."**

Why did he come to Jesus **by night**? Perhaps it was the only time Nicodemus was able to get together with Jesus. But it's not a stretch, knowing the circumstances in which Nicodemus found himself, that he may have used the cover of darkness to keep others from noticing this visit. And it's also possible, in light of John's use of symbolism, that the darkness symbolizes the spiritual condition of Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus, the Light of the world.

You could understand why Nicodemus might not want others to know about his visit to Jesus. He was both \* **a Pharisee** (the strictest of the strict), and like Joseph, **a ruler of the Jews**, a member of the Council. And like Joseph, he was spiritually minded. You can tell by what he said to Jesus:

**Read 3:2**

\* <sup>2</sup> **... "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."**

Nicodemus recognized what most others on the Council did not – that Jesus was sent **from God**. Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus that he must be born *again* or born *from above*. His birth into the nation of Israel was not enough. As the Gospel of John reveals, Nicodemus needed to be re-born through personal faith in Jesus.

That meeting with Jesus must have left an impression on Nicodemus. It seems his suspicion

that Jesus was sent **from God** was confirmed either during or sometime after that meeting.

Why do I say that?

**[Turn to John 7]**

Some members of the Council and leading Pharisees were chewing out some of their police officers who were sent to arrest Jesus. The officers were asked why they failed to capture Jesus:

**Read John 7:46-49**

\* <sup>46</sup> **The officers answered, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks."** <sup>47</sup> **The Pharisees then answered them, "You have not also been led astray, have you?"** \* <sup>48</sup> **"No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he?"** <sup>49</sup> **"But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed."**

The Pharisees reply suggests that they were convinced that none of the rulers – none of the Council members – nor any of the Pharisees – believed in Jesus. It was only out of the ignorant and cursed masses that believers can be found. At that point no one seems to have known about any support for Jesus on the part of Joseph or Nicodemus.

But at this point Nicodemus to speaks up:

**Read John 7:50-52**

\* <sup>50</sup> **Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, being one of them) said to them,** <sup>51</sup> **"Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?"** <sup>52</sup> **They answered him, "You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee."**

You'll notice that Nicodemus does not come out and express his faith in Jesus. But he *does* testify to a principle that would benefit Jesus – that the accused (Jesus) should be heard.

Nicodemus had already met with Jesus privately, and had probably heard Him speak publicly as well. He'd probably at least concluded at this point that if others fairly listened to Jesus, He might touch their hearts as He had touched his own heart.

But the others would have none of it. They turned on Nicodemus, suggesting he was a supporter of Jesus – perhaps a sympathizer from Galilee, that backwater place from where no respectable prophet would come (they must have forgotten that Jonah, and possibly Nahum, were

from the area of Galilee!). And it seems Nicodemus said no more.

It seems that both Joseph and Nicodemus were secretive disciples. But they were not alone, as John suggests in chapter 12.

**[Turn to John 12]**

In chapter 12, John explains why unbelief was a common reaction to the miraculous signs of Jesus. He does so by quoting from Isaiah 6:10:

**Read 12:42,43**

\* <sup>39</sup> **For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again,** <sup>40</sup> **"HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM."**

<sup>41</sup> **These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him.**

But even though many were blinded to the truth in Jesus, others were not:

**Read 12:42,43**

\* <sup>42</sup> **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;** <sup>43</sup> **for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.**

It seems that Joseph and Nicodemus were not alone among the leaders in Israel who believed in Jesus:

**Read 12:42a**

\* <sup>42</sup> **Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, ...**

Why were people like Joseph and Nicodemus secret disciples? It was a mixture of *whom* and *what* they feared – as well as *what* they loved.

Fear was an issue. *Whom* did they fear? The especially feared the Pharisees on the Council, and probably even those *not* on the council. *What* did they fear? They feared what the Pharisees (who were most influential in the synagogues) could do to them:

**Read 12:42b**

\* <sup>42</sup> **... but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue;**

Love was also an issue. Their secrecy was not only motivated by fear, but by love – but not the kind of love they should have had. *What* did they love?

## Read 12:43

\* <sup>43</sup> **for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.**

Can you relate? Does misplaced fear and misplaced love cause *you* to sit down when you need to stand up? Do *you* have that problem at home?...work?...school?

Who of us here does not know the power of peer pressure? You may've felt the pressure as a young person, as your friends plotted to go into that store and take something without paying for it. How did you handle it?

You may have felt it as the alcohol or drugs were passed around your circle of underage friends. You knew breaking the law was not right. You knew what the right thing to do was. How did you handle it?

You may have felt it on that business trip, when your colleagues suggested going out to that club after your meeting that day. You knew it was inappropriate. Neither Jesus nor your wife would approve. How did you handle it?

Joseph and Nicodemus felt pressure through the days of Jesus' ministry. And many times they had yielded. But they changed – and so can we.

Something happens in chapter 19. \* They grasped the handle of closet door, opened it, and walked out. That's why we read what we do in chapter 19:

[Turn to back John 19]

### Read vs.38,39a

\* <sup>38</sup> **After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. <sup>39</sup> Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came,**

Out of the closet and into the open. Joseph (the secret disciple), and Nicodemus (who first came to Jesus under the cover of darkness), open the door and step out into the light. Better late than never.

Instead of simply berating them for their fear, let's be inspired by their newfound courage. And it *did* take courage. Coming out of the closet in this way was risky. They took a risk before Pilate. To go before Pilate to ask for Jesus' remains would link them with the Crucified One. Identifying with an enemy of the state was not a good idea. What would Pilate think? What

would the soldiers who took delight in crucifying Jesus think about these sympathizers? Would they seek to punish them as well?

They also took a very great risk with their fellow Council members. Certainly word would get out about what they were doing. Would they be put out of the synagogue – or worse? We aren't told what happened to them, but I'm sure the consequences were great and things changed drastically for these 2 men.

Something happened within them. Their fear of man paled in comparison to their love for God. The praise of men became less appealing than the praise of God. And out of the closet they walked.

They even stand in contrast to the other disciples of Jesus. Matthew 26:56 tells us His closest disciples left Him after His arrest. John and Peter followed at a distance to find out what was going on during the trial. And the only one of the eleven who was specifically mentioned as being at the foot of the cross was John.

At a time when some of Jesus' followers seemed to go into hiding, these 2 came out into the open. They wanted to identify with Jesus. How did they do it?

### Read vs.39,40

<sup>39</sup> **Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, \* bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. <sup>40</sup> So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.**

Joseph and Nicodemus hastily prepared Jesus' body for burial. Time was short. The sun was setting and they wanted to complete the burial before dark. They washed the body of Jesus and wrapped it in strips of cloth smeared with about 75-100 pounds of a gummy mixture of oils, perfumes, and spices.

**Myrrh** was a gum from trees found in Arabia. It was very expensive and very fragrant. It just so happens that **myrrh** was also one of the gifts that was brought by the wise men in honor of the birth of Jesus, as noted in Matthew 2:11. It seems fitting that what was offered in celebration of His birth, was applied to Him in the aftermath of His death. In such a burial, the smell of the myrrh and aloes was intended to mask the stench of decay. But it was also the loving expression of 2 disciples, freshly arisen from the closet in which they hid.

## **Read vs.41,42**

**\*<sup>41</sup> Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.<sup>42</sup> Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.**

Time was short. They had a deadline to meet. They completed their work and buried Jesus in a new tomb. It wasn't in a public cemetery but in a private garden. Matthew 27:60 reveals that the tomb actually belonged to Joseph. Jesus was buried in the place set aside for Joseph. And what wonderful symbolism we have in this. What happens here wonderfully illustrates salvation. Jesus takes the place of Joseph in death – just as He died on the cross in Joseph's place, for his sin.

My guess is that we're pretty sympathetic toward Joseph and Nicodemus. We've all experienced the pull to remain in the closet. In a world where so many have rejected Jesus – His existence, His deity, His teaching, His ethics and morality – we risk being labeled a fanatic, a Neanderthal, narrow-minded, ignorant – and worse. And when the opportunity arrives to identify with Jesus, we know the pull to enter the closet, pull the door behind us, and hold onto the knob tightly from the inside.

Yet just outside the door are opportunities. Outside are those who need to relief from their sin – who need to experience forgiveness – who need to meet Jesus. But that may only happen as our love for Jesus and others becomes greater than our fear – as the praise of God is more appealing to us than the praise of men.

Some closet Christians are so because they don't want to take up their cross and follow Jesus. But closet Christians have their own crosses to bear:

### *1. The cross of guilt.*

The Holy Spirit works in us to prompt, guide, and convict. If we don't live for Jesus, He'll let us know that. The only remedy is confession, and then change. A closet Christian bears the cross of guilt.

### *2. The cross of regrets.*

Facing years, even decades, of regrets and missed opportunities, is not easy. "If only I had said/done/been..." Coming out of the closet may not release you from those regrets, but it will

keep you from heaping up a pile of new ones.

The late Pastor Ray Stedman was counseling at a Billy Graham Crusade. He spoke with a young man who came forward at the invitation. Ray told the young man that knowing Jesus can remove his fear of death. The young man responded to Ray this way: ***"I've never feared death, I've only feared that I'll waste my life."***

The third cross a closet Christian bears...

### *3. The cross of limited usefulness.*

Going through life without that sense of fulfillment that comes from being and doing all God had called us to be and do, can leave us feeling hollow. We've been called by Jesus to make a difference. As Jesus pointed out in John 15, we've been called to bear fruit – and fulfillment is found in doing that.

When I was a little boy I was given a yellow, wool sweater. It was too big, so we put it away until I grew. It stayed behind the attic door for a couple of years. I often thought about that sweater, and looked forward to using it. When we finally opened the attic door and dug it out of the box – it was too late. The sweater was filled with holes. It had been eaten by moths. It was beyond the point of usefulness. It came out of the closet too late.

But praise God it wasn't too late for Joseph and Nicodemus. And it doesn't have to be too late for us – *if* we happen to find ourselves in the closet.

A closet Christian is like a clock in a dark closet. It may keep perfect time. It may have important and accurate information to share. But it makes no impact until it is brought out into the light – for all to see.

A closet Christian is also like a candle in a closet...or under a bowl. As Jesus said:

## **Read Matthew 5:14-16**

**\*<sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden;<sup>15</sup> nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.<sup>16</sup> "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.**

Somewhere there are Christians in a closet. And today, the Lord is calling them out. On which side of the closet door are you?