

Secret Believers

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[0 : 00] John chapter 19 is where we've come to in our studies in John's Gospel. And I believe that there's great encouragement and yet there's great challenge as well in coming to a passage like this at this particular time.

Because this is a passage where we see two secret believers stepping forward and owning their Lord. We said just a few minutes ago, I'm not ashamed to own my Lord or to defend his cause. Now, up until this point, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus couldn't be heard saying these words. Up until this time, they could not be seen owning their Lord.

But from this point onwards, everything was changing. And we don't have to work very hard to try and draw application here and take this from Jerusalem then to Targaryen now.

Because this is the week where God willing, in one week's time, we will sit at the Lord's table. And already, even in the intimations, you've heard the challenge, the encouragement go out.

[1 : 28] And let me say it again. If you know, if you're trusting the Lord, if you've asked him to forgive your sin, if you've asked him to come into your life, if you know him, if you know him, if he is your Lord, then the encouragement, the challenge, that actually the command of Scripture, which comes directly from Jesus, is that you will come to his table and you'll profess your faith in him as your Lord.

Now, I know you well enough to know now that there are some here who are believers, but secretly, there are many here who are believers openly.

But I know some of you are believers secretly. Yes, you believe in the Lord Jesus. Yes, you have asked him to come into your life and forgive your sin.

And yes, he's come. But up until now, when the table has been set, you haven't been there. You've been with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in the secret believers' corner.

And so today, John, as God leads him, tells us about how these two men come out of that secret place and they profess their faith in Jesus.

[3 : 06] And my prayer is that some of you might do the same over these next few days. So I hope to go through four points.

I might just go through three. But I have four noted down here. And I want to begin by thinking about Joseph. We'll think about Joseph and Nicodemus.

But I want to begin by focusing on Joseph because that's how John begins here. There was a fear that discouraged them. That's the first point. The second point is that there was a friend that encouraged them.

The third point that we'll come to is the fact that their faith was costly. And if we get to the final point, we'll think about the work that they were called to, which was crucial.

So first of all, a fear that discouraged them. Verse 38. Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews.

[4 : 16] First question is, was that fear a rational fear? Some people just by nature, they are fearful. You say a boot to them and they run a mile.

It's just their makeup. They see terrifying things everywhere, often where there are no terrifying things. So was Joseph's fear here a reasonable, rational fear?

And the answer to that question is very much it was. There was a fear that discouraged him, but that fear was very rational.

Who was Joseph? Well, if we think across the span of the Gospels, there's various things that we know about Joseph. Matthew in chapter 27 tells us that he was a rich man.

Luke in chapter 23 tells us that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He was a man of status and power in that locality.

[5 : 16] Mark in chapter 15 tells us that he was a religious man. He was divided in the Jewish religion. Luke in chapter 23 tells us that he was a good and upright man.

That's how he was considered. He was considered to be one of the pillars of that society. He was a good and upright man. That's who Joseph was. So he was a man of considerable status and importance.

He had a reputation. He'd worked hard to cultivate that reputation. But if he was to side with Jesus, he would lose everything.

He'd be off the council instantly. He would be excommunicated from the synagogue. He would be set off to the margins of that life and that culture.

His reputation would be in tatters. So he had everything to lose. And he feared that. Which is quite sensible.

[6 : 33] And it's the same story with Nicodemus. He's a similar character. He has great religious. He has great social standing. But if he sides with Christ, he loses everything.

And he had a taste of that already even. Because in John chapter 7, as the plans to kill Jesus start to gain momentum, Nicodemus just for a second hoots his head above the parapet.

And he asks a question to those who are plotting. He says, does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he's doing? Just a question.

And it's a question in accord with the right legal procedure. The answer was, our law does not condemn someone without first hearing from them as to what they're doing.

But even having said that, they bite his head off. They roar at him. Are you from Galilee too?

[7 : 34] How dare you ask that question of us? Are you siding with him? And so his head goes back down.

He's put his head flat up and off. The bullets are flying. He's back down. So they were both fearful. And we understand why. We understand why they were secret believers.

Some here, I believe, are fearful. Some, everywhere, are fearful of trusting Christ.

It doesn't matter where you go and preach. But there will be people in the congregation who are fearful to trust the Lord. Because the fear is, what will he do?

If you give him your life. What will my life look like? If I become a Christian. What will I lose? Where can I not go?

[8 : 41] What will he require of me? And all these questions, they build to create a fear. That holds us back. Spurgeon asks this question.

He says, is this not the most extraordinary fear in the world? Does a sick man fear the change that health brings? Does a hungry man fear bread?

Does a thirsty man fear water? How extraordinary to fear wholehearted obedience to Jesus. And you know what so many do.

What will he do with me? If you're sitting here this morning. And you're fearful of what Christ may do in your life. Think about how much he loves you.

Think about the cross. Did anyone else love you that much? To lay down their life for you? Why are we fearful?

[9 : 47] There are others who are fearful. But you're a step on from the one who's thinking about becoming a Christian. But holding back. There are others who are fearful. And yet we are Christians.

There are those who are trusting Jesus. Here and everywhere. In congregations all over the nation. You're trusting Christ.

But secretly. For fear of your family sometimes. What they might say. Sometimes it's a fear of the people in your workplace.

And how they'll treat you. When they find out you're a Christian. Sometimes there's a fear of the people in the community. That you're part of.

And how they'll respond to you. When they hear you've gone forward as a Christian. Maybe they'll mock me if I'm a Christian. Maybe they'll keep at a distance from me.

[10 : 48] If they hear that I've gone funny as a Christian. Maybe they'll watch my life. Listen to my every word. And try and trip me up. If they hear that I'm a Christian.

Maybe they'll ask me difficult questions. Just to laugh at me. Because I'm a Christian. And I'd like to say they won't.

But. Maybe they will. Probably they will. Because Jesus did say to us. In this world. If you're one of mine.

You will have trouble. They persecuted me. They will persecute you. So if these are fears. That you have. They're rational fears.

They're not without foundation. Joseph of Arimathea and Thea. Had to face them. And so do we. But the question is.

[11:47] Who do we fear. And respect more. Is it people. Or is it God. Eric Alexander.

A teacher who was in Glasgow for years. Says this. There comes a time. When you have to decide. Whether you fear men. More than you fear God. And this was that time.

For Joseph of Arimathea. And Nicodemus. They had feared people. For too long. As I was preparing.

I was. I was thinking. I wonder. Could they recall. The words. Of Jesus. As they wrestled. With their fears. Remember what Jesus said.

In Matthew chapter 10. He said. In verse 28. Matthew 10. Do not be afraid. Of those who kill the body. But cannot kill the soul.

[12:49] Rather be afraid. Of the one. Who can destroy. Both soul. And body. And hell. Are not two sparrows. Sold for a penny. Yet not one of them.

Will fall. To the ground. Outside your father's care. And even the. Berry hairs. Of your head. Are all numbered. So. Don't be afraid. You are worth.

More than many sparrows. Whoever. Acknowledges me. Before others. I will also. Acknowledge. Before my father. In heaven. But whoever. Disowns me.

Before others. I will disown. Before my father. In heaven. Did they have these words.

In their minds. As they. As they wrestled. With their fear. And as they. Wandered up. Towards. Pilate's palace. You can almost.

[13:46] Hear them singing. To each other. Praising God. I am not ashamed. I am not ashamed. I am not ashamed. To own. My Lord. Or to.

Defend. His cause. Will you sing with them? There was a fear. That discouraged them.

But secondly. There was a friend. That encouraged him. Thinking about Joseph. In particular. A fear. That had discouraged him.

For so long. But secondly. A friend. That now. Encouraged him. Verse 38. We continue. With Pilate's permission. He came. And took the body away.

He was accompanied. He was accompanied. By Nicodemus. The man. Who earlier. Had visited Jesus. At night. So the friend. That encouraged Joseph. Was Nicodemus.

[14:43] Sometimes you meet characters. In the Bible. And you wonder. Whatever happened to them? People. You hear of people. Who have an encounter. With Christ. And then we.

We see them walk off. The pages of scripture. And they never walk back on. And you're left with the question. What did they ever do? What happened next? Like the rich young ruler.

In Mark chapter 10. Remember. He came to Jesus. And he. He wants the eternal life. That Jesus can give him. And he recognises. That Jesus is the one.

Who can give him that life. But when he realises the cost. He walks away sad. And I always think.

When I read that. Did he ever walk back. To Christ. Or was that it done? When I read about Demas.

[15:40] In 2 Timothy 4. He's one who deserted the Lord. Because he loved the world. And I often wonder.

Did he ever return to the Lord? Or was his faith. Shipwrecked. Eternally. Now these are questions. That we don't have the answers to. And for a long time. The same questions. Hung over

Nicodemus. John 3. It's one of the most famous passages.

In scripture. Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus by night. He's this religious man. Similar to Joseph. Of great stature. And so. In the shadows.

He comes to see Jesus. Because he knows. How much it would cost him. To be identified with Christ. So. He comes to Jesus. And there's this. Intense conversation. Where Jesus. Says to him.

[16:34] I know all your religious stuff. But you need to be born again. You need to be born of. Of the spirit. God has to come into your. Your life. He has to do that.

Work. Which only he can do. And Nicodemus leaves. And for a while.

We're wondering. Well. What happened next? John 7. The head is up. Just for a second. The bullets fly. In his direction.

And now in John 19. We see Nicodemus. Walking shoulder to shoulder. With Joseph. As they encouraged each other.

To own. Their want. If I can make an observation here.

[17:28] Not just. From here. But. Just from. My Christian life. So often. What I.

What I see. Is that. Secret. Believers. Encourage. Other secret. Believers. To stay in that. Secret place. So you hear. In these conversations. You're not going forward. Are you? You're not.

You're not going to go forward. Are you?

Surely not. You're not ready yet. And I've thought about it as well. But no. You're not. I'm not going. You're not going. Are you? There's plenty of time.

For that later. Let's not be rash. In making any. Any kind of decision. Let's just stay back in the shadows. Plenty of time. Joseph. Joseph.

[18:29] Of Arimathea. And Nicodemus. They. They bucked that trend. Because these two. Secret. Believers. Somehow. In.

Their. Connections. In the community. As they. Spend time. With each other. They say to each other. Enough's enough. We've been in the dark place. For too long.

It's time to go forward. It's time to own our Lord. I'm thinking about these men.

It would have been. So easy for them to say. We've lost our chance now. We've watched the crucifixion. We've watched Jesus die.

He's gone. There's no point now. You can imagine them. Having that conversation. As they kind of sink into.

[19:29] A. A. Discouragement. But no. They go forward. Hebrews 10. 25. Says. Let us not give up.

Meeting together. Some. Some. Are in the habit. Of doing. But let us. Encourage one another. And all the more. As we see.

The day. Approaching. Let us not. Give up. Meeting together. As we do. But let us.

Encourage. One another. Not discourage. One another. Spur one another on. Encourage one another. And all the more. As we see the day approaching.

When Jesus will come back. And every knee will bow. And every tongue will confess. Like it or not. That he. Is the Lord. So.

[20:26] Seek out believers. I want to encourage you today. And I want you to encourage. Each other. Not to stay in the shadows. But to come into the light.

Will you encourage. The congregation. As you step forward. In obedience. To remember. The Lord's death. And to profess.

Your faith in him. Maybe you've had. Your chances before. Maybe you've been here. A dozen times before. Maybe you've had this wrestle.

Maybe you should have come. Years ago. Or decades ago. Maybe you've stepped forward. A bit like Nicodemus. In the past. And felt the bullets fly.

From Satan. And you step back again. And now you're saying. The opportunity is gone. I'm finished.

[21:26] If that's your mindset. Look at Joseph. Of Arimathea. And look at Nicodemus.

They're not letting past failures. Hold them back. They're not sinking into. Self-pity and despair. They're nailing. Their colors.

To the mass. They're owning. The body. Of their Lord. A thought that.

Should over for a while. This week. It's a thought. That they. Wouldn't have been able to think. Because they don't have the vision. That we have. With scripture. It's quite a thought.

To consider. That. As they owned. Their Lord. As they took. The body of their Lord. Down to that cross. Their hands.

[22:23] Their hands. Would have been stained. With the blood. That was shed. To own them. Eternally. And yet.

They didn't know. They didn't know. There was a. Fear. That discouraged. Joseph. And yet.

There was a friend. That stepped forward. To. Encourage. Joseph. and thirdly and it's going to be fine there's a faith that was costly sometimes you find yourself in a situation and it's not until you're in the middle of it that you realise the intensity of it sometimes you walk into an office or you walk into a room, you walk into the middle of a debate and there's fireworks going off everywhere and you're running for cover, you just didn't realise how highly charged things were now things in

Jerusalem at this point were as highly charged as it was possible to be, the place was absolutely jam packed with people because of the religious festival that was ongoing the crowds were only just settling down after the crucifixion, the atmosphere would still be electric and very hostile the Jewish leaders were furiously angry still because as Jesus was crucified a sign was across the top of the cross that said this is the king of the Jews, we don't want that they said, take that sign down, just say he claimed he was the king of the Jews and Pilate said, no what I have written, I have written it stays they're furious about that and Pilate is furious because he had his hand forced by these Jewish leaders and the Jewish crowds so at this point in time the atmosphere is electric the crowds are just on the point of riot

Pilate furious Jewish leaders furious and I say all of this, just to highlight this is the worst possible time to get involved with Jesus because Jesus had been the reason for this whole political and social and spiritual storm it all came back to Christ and so to go anywhere near Jesus at this point in time you were taking your life in your hands the disciples, they knew that and so the disciples are nowhere to be seen they're locked away in a room somewhere but here we see Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus two very religiously and politically savvy men they understand the risks of all this they understand the political atmosphere in the place they understand that to walk into Pilate's office and ask for the body of Christ you were probably taking your life in your hands and yet you did it their faith was costly this act of faith could very easily have cost them their lives instantly and almost certainly it did lose them their reputations and their careers there was a cost here what happened next after they got hold of the permission from Pilate well, verse 39 Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes about 75 Pilates taking Jesus' body the two of them wrapped it with the spices and strips of linen this was in accordance with the Jewish body of customs at the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid because it was the Jewish day of preparation and since the tomb was nearby they laid Jesus there all this was costly it was costly for Joseph to give to Jesus the tomb that he himself had purchased it was costly for Nicodemus to bring such an immense weight of spices we don't properly get this with measures and weights but the weight of spices that Nicodemus brought was the kind of weight of spices that would be used to anoint a king not an ordinary man but a king it was an incredible cost to what Nicodemus brought and so at every level here their faith was costly and it was driven by love sometimes we can do things we can make religious or Christian acts and there can be mixed motivation because we know it will draw approval from people it will gain us credit in some quarters for these men there was absolutely nothing to gain at this point Jesus was dead and they did not expect him to rise and the disciples and no one expected him to rise at this point Jesus and his people were absolutely ostracised they were enemies of the state so they had nothing to gain by doing this there was no profit that they could acquire out of doing this so why did they do it?

[28 : 48] why this costly risky dangerous act of faith it was because they loved their Lord that was it they did it out of love J.C. Ryle says he comes forward to honour Christ when the apostles had forsaken him and fled he cares for him and delights to do him service even when dead not because of any miracle which he saw him do but out of free and gratuitous love he does not hesitate to confess himself as one of Christ's friends at a time when Jews and Romans alike had condemned him as a malefactor and put him and put him to death their profession of faith is costly their honouring of Jesus is costly and your profession of faith may well be costly if you honour

Christ at this table if you honour Christ in the yard if you honour Christ in your family if you honour Christ in the office it may well be very costly you won't lose your life in this country like people are across the world in North Korea and in India and in Pakistan and in Iran and in different places we are not losing our lives as they are but we may well lose the respect of some of the people that we care for we may well lose the friendship of some of the people that we consider to be close to us we may well find that to honour Christ doesn't help our career it may complicate our family life there will be a cost but is he not worth it that's the question is he not worth it

Joseph and Nicodemus they counted the cost and they determined he was worth it and they could not see what he had done for them we can not only do we see the death of Jesus as they did but we see why he died we see our part in his death we see that he died to pay the price for our sin so even if it costs us everything does he not deserve it is he not worth it here is love fast of the ocean love and kindness as the flood when the prince of life our ransom shed for us his precious blood who his love will not remember take that question into the week with you who his love will not

remember let's pray heaven father we pray that you would take your word and apply it to each of our lives in the power of the holy spirit we pray that you would give us the encouragement the courage that we need the courage that you are so willing to give to us as we come to you and help us we pray as joseph and nicodemus eventually did help us we pray to show our love and our faith for you and in you as you give us opportunity to as we think about the prospect of the lord's table we think about the call that is upon us to examine ourselves and see our sin and remember in love our saviour who died to take our sin away help us we pray not to miss this opportunity even if we've missed a thousand before help us not to miss this opportunity to profess our faith in christ if truly we are believing in that and we ask it in jesus name amen