

# Joseph of Arimathea

By Sharon Fox

I, Joseph of Arimathea, pen this account of the extraordinary events I witnessed today, the Friday of Passover.

I have been a follower of Jesus for some time. I believe He is the son of God. I rejoiced when I heard he had entered Jerusalem at the beginning of this week as the heralded King and the long-awaited Messiah.

I had been looking forward all week to celebrating the Passover meal this evening with my family, as is our tradition. This would be the first year without the presence of my father who had been the spiritual head of the household and a follower of Jesus of Nazareth too.

When my father, Matthias, died only a few months ago from a sudden weakness, his body was placed in the last available niche in the old family Sepulcher or tomb. It was then sealed permanently. During the year prior to my father's death, my sister and her two children died of a fever within weeks of one another. Since burial is to take place within twenty-four hours of death, the readiness of a family tomb and adequate supplies for the preparation of a body are critical. After my father died, I had a new family tomb prepared. I also purchased a substantial quantity of oils and preserving spices. I expected the supplies to last for many years.

My brothers and I began our business early this morning because tonight was the celebration of Passover. Just after our noon day meal however, word came to me that Jesus had been arrested the night before, tried and sentenced to death. Both Pontius Pilate and Herod had participated in the sequence of events which led to a thief named Barabbas being released and a sentence of crucifixion brought upon Jesus. I was also told Jesus had been beaten and forced to carry his cross from Jerusalem to the place where he was crucified. Crucifixion is the harshest punishment given to the very worst of criminals.

When I heard what had happened, I quickly made my way to Golgotha to see for myself if it was Jesus who had actually been crucified. I stood for a moment when I arrived trying to take in the entirety of what was happening. Although it was mid-day there is was dark. It seemed to enfold the entire city. I suddenly felt an earth shake so violently I staggered repeatedly to remain upright.

My mind could not grasp the sight of three men hanging from crosses. The one in the center was as I feared, Jesus. To add to my shock, I witnessed a soldier approaching him with a spear in his hand. With both hands he swung the spear upward, brutally piercing his side. It was a horrific act of violence. Jesus gave no flinch nor uttered not a sound when the spear was thrust into his side. Jesus must have been already dead because I could only see blood and what looked like water flow from his side. It was as if a bowl had been tipped over to allow the contents to slip over the edge. Words fail to accurately describe the emotions I felt. The trauma of witnessing the entire scene brought confusion, profound grief, gripping anger, and devastating shock will always be with me.

I can only surmise the impact of those images and emotions propelled me into action. Without hesitation I turned back toward the Palace of Pontius Pilate to request the release of the body of Jesus for burial. I am known to him as a successful merchant who pays his taxes, so he seemed almost happy to grant me permission to remove the body of Jesus. Time was of the essence. Not only did the body need to be prepared for burial, but because I am a Jew, I would be touching a dead body. I would not be able to attend the Passover Celebration without a ceremonial cleansing at the temple.

With the needed permission from Pontius Pilate, I sent one of my servants to tell my household what I was about to do. He was instructed to meet me at the new burial tomb with water vessels, preparation tools, oil, and the spices. Another servant was sent to notify the Priests in the Temple, a ceremonial cleansing would be required later this afternoon. It was later that afternoon the same servant would make arrangements for clean clothing to be sent to the temple for me and one other to wear home.

Next, I went to a linen merchant who was known to sell the finest fabrics available in Jerusalem. I purchased a sheet to carry the body of Jesus, a burial shroud, and small washing clothes. On my way back to Golgotha, with my arms loaded, I met Nicodemus, a man I knew to be a follower of Jesus. When I told him what I intended to do, he offered to help me. He was a Pharisee, so I felt he would be up to the tasks we had to accomplish quickly.

Nicodemus and I with our servants arrived just as they were ready to take down the body of Jesus from the cross. His body was laid on the carrying sheet. The four of us tied knots in each corner and carried the body to the new tomb. My arms were shaking when I arrived. I cannot be sure if that was a result of the

weight of his body, the distance we carried the body or the anticipation of the duties which were before us.

The rock at the entrance of the tomb was quickly moved aside. We placed the body of Jesus on the stone table in the middle of the tomb and carefully began to unwrap him. Although I am a man who is proud of his ability to control his emotions, tears came to my eyes as we uncovered his head. Blood was all over his face; dirt was matted in his hair from the apparent falls and mistreatment during the day and he reeked of sweat. Nicodemus assured me that head injuries always bled to excess, which was evident by the significant amount of blood we saw on his face. We decided to start with the back of the body first and finish with the front, which meant we had to roll the body over. Nicodemus and his servant were on one side and one of my servants and I were on the other. We pulled the sheet so the body would tip over toward me and be positioned face down on the center of the table. Nicodemus gasped, because he saw Jesus' back before I did. When I looked at Nicodemus's face it was the color of goat skins bleached in the sun. Had it not been for his servant quickly grasping his swaying body, I believe he would have fallen to his knees. The condition of Jesus' back after the beating was grotesque. After a moment, he breathed deeply and regained his composure. His color returned somewhat. He then suggested we keep the body covered as much as possible and work from the head and neck down. We would only uncover small portions of his back and body at a time.

Once we had the body positioned, we asked the servants to stand outside the tomb so we could begin to work. Nicodemus and I began by pouring water over the back of his head and hair, searching for any puncture wound from the crown of thorns which had been apparently jammed down on his head. Each wound had to be washed carefully and filled with oil. If any wound is missed it would attract insects and promote the speed of decay within hours. We worked silently as we washed the wounds first with water, then poured drops of oil into the damaged places. Once the wounds were cleaned and oiled, we applied more oil over all the undamaged skin surfaces with the spreading tools, (knife like instruments). Nicodemus generously applied the layer of spices made of rosemary, myrrh and aloe. This dual task of applied oil and a thick layer of spices on top, helps to preserve the entire body. We sent the servants several times for more water. When we finished his back, we moved to his arms where he had skinned areas cause, no doubt, when he had fallen while carrying the heavy cross. We removed rope fibers left in the wounds at his wrists.

Next, we cleaned, oiled, applied spices to the wounds where the nails had pierced his hands. Cleaning the nail holes in his hands caused me to feel faint. It took several deep breaths for me to regain my focus. We both struggled again when we treated his ankles and feet. It was gruesome work. When we finished with his back side, we turned him over again. The rivulets of water from washing the back of his head had made streaks on his face while evidence remained of the excessive blood mixed with sweat and dirt. His face and chest showed signs of repeated blows.

A Jewish man's beard is a source of tradition and pride. Several abrasions were present where the hair of his beard was now missing. I do not know if the guards pulled out his beard or if his falling on the road to Golgotha was the cause, but portions were gone. Again, we carefully cleaned the thorn pierced places on his forehead and the scratches on his face and added oil and spices.

We moved down his chest to the gash on his side which was a vicious wound requiring additional time to thoroughly clean. We poured in several measures of oil. The fluid from his wounded side was still sticky where it had spread over his lower body and run down his upper leg to his knee.

We washed his legs and his skinned knees. The smell of rosemary, the herb of remembrance, was now in our nostrils as we worked. The time went fast. We ministered to all parts of his body. We finished our work with the prayers for the dead. We summoned our servants to help us lift the body again and position the clean shroud under him and then fold it over the top of his body. We had used seventy-five pounds of oils and spices to dress his body today. It was clear his body would need additional oil and spices applied when the Sabbath was over. The women followers of Jesus told us they would come with additional supplies to anoint his body on the day after the Sabbath. They could not stay to assist us as their responsibilities demanded they be home for several hours to prepare the Seder meal before the family gathering.

For a moment, I cast my mind back to the preparation of my father's body. I was recalling the ease of washing, spreading oil and spices on his smooth unblemished body. It was an honor to prepare the bodies of these two men I loved so much. It was the strong voice of Nicodemus which returned me from my reflections on death and how different this experience was from the death of my father.

Just then, one of the guards hollered “eajal” through the entry of the tomb. He wanted us to **hurry** and leave because he had to seal the stone once it was rolled back into place. Apparently, the authorities were afraid someone was going to steal the body of Jesus. I almost laughed. Did they not know that no one who was a follower of Jewish law would touch a dead body on the Sabbath which was to begin in just over an hour? No one was going to steal his body – it was forbidden!

I am thankful I had sent my servants earlier to tell the priests to prepare for our arrival at the temple. The Levite at the temple allowed us to wash, pray and put-on our clean clothes to attend Passover. We might have, under different circumstances, been isolated for seven days which was the normal time for cleansing after touching a dead body.

Nicodemus and I walked together toward our homes, we both had much on our minds. I reflected on the stockpiled spices and oils I had accumulated, and the recent completion of the new sepulcher. I realized they had been a part of a grander plan which enabled me to provide a place for the burial of Jesus. Nicodemus said he was thinking of the chance meeting outside of town which let him to stand with me as we prepared the body of Jesus. I am thankful for Nicodemus willing heart. I could not have found a better partner to help me do the grueling work. What a blessing that God sent him to work with me today.

I write this because I believe this day will be spoken of for many years to come. I want to recall for myself the details of how the day unfolded. Those of us who were his followers had hoped, yes expected him, and believed he was the King of the Jews, and he would lead our people to a victory over the oppressive government.

I weep as I think of what he experienced today. The crucifixion of the man I believed to be the son of God is incomprehensible. I do not understand why this man who was gentle, truthful, and wise had to die and die in such a tragic way. Yet, I rejoice over the privilege of serving him in his burial.

Why did this happen? Only God knows!

*Jehovah God, to you be the glory!*

*Joseph of Arimathea*

Matthew 27:57-60, Mark 15: 43-46, Luke 23:56-60, John 19:38-42

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