

John 19 Study Guide for Holy Saturday

The Burial of a King

John 19:38–42 NIV

After observing Good Friday by revisiting Jesus' crucifixion and death, we begin to anticipate Easter Sunday and the celebration of our Risen Lord and Savior. However, in the middle of that anticipation is an awkward pause, a divided disruption if you will, in what has been a series of days during Holy Week when we follow the journey of Jesus to the cross. Good Friday marks the climatic end to that journey. We have not launched into the new journey that begins for all creation on Easter morning. We find ourselves today on Holy Saturday, having to rest between these two journeys. It's a time of reflection on all that has happened, a reflection that bleeds over into expectation of what it all will add up to. It's a pause of ambivalence, a space for conflicted thoughts and emotions to rise. What do we do in this space? In many ways, it represents the space Christians live in every day. As followers of Christ, we live, as it has been said, "between the times" of this present evil age and the fullness of the Kingdom that arrives upon Jesus' return. We wrestle with Holy Saturday every day of the week, not just this final day of Holy Week. For believers, living between the times is a constant struggle to remain focused on Christ. We are always tempted to return to our usual lives just as the disciples did after the events of Jesus' death. Interestingly, it's been said that Holy Saturday is one of the busiest shopping days of the year. It seems when we are caught "between the times" we often seek return to business as usual. For the believer, that is why we return, Sunday after Sunday, to hear God's word to us which reminds us of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, calling forth worship of our Triune God and a witness of him to each other and to an on looking world. Today, as we spend some intentional time in a Holy Saturday service, we have the opportunity to hear God's word to us again, a word that comes from beyond the grave, a word that whispers of life, even from the tomb of our Lord.

Perhaps, as we hear the story of Jesus' burial, we can have another reminder of who he is and what he has done for us. Perhaps this story will provide some reminders of how to live "between the times;" how to rest on Holy Saturday.

Let's now turn our attention to a short passage that retells the final event of Holy Week.

John 19:38–42 NIV – After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

The passage begins with "After these things" which points back to the final events of Jesus being crucified and left dead on a cross. In those final events, we are told that this takes place on the "day of preparation" which is the Friday that precedes the Jewish Sabbath. Because the Sabbath is soon approaching with the sun going down, the Jews did not want the crucified bodies left hanging on the cross. That sets up the dilemma that prompts a hurried burial of Jesus.

We are introduced to Joseph of Arimathea, which we know very little about except his mention here in this account. What we find out about him is he was a secret disciple of Jesus "because of his fear of the Jews." That's an interesting phrase that

the writer John chooses to use at this junction. He seems to want us to connect Joseph's response with that of the disciples who followed Jesus openly during his ministry but turned into secret disciples themselves by hiding in a locked room "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). In that account, it was the appearance of the resurrected Jesus that brought the disciples out of hiding. In this account, it seems that the death of Christ is what drew out this cowering disciple. Perhaps John wants us to remember Jesus' words when indicating how he was going to die. Jesus said, 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32).

We will see a similar effect Jesus' death has on Nicodemus in a moment. But in both, we see that Jesus' words are already being fulfilled. Jesus' death is drawing all people to himself, even those who have been cowering in the shadows. Joseph and Nicodemus both were hesitant followers of Christ out of fear. Now, even before the resurrection, Jesus' death is calling them into the light and becoming public with their following of Jesus.

For example, Joseph is no longer acting in fear. He boldly asks Pilate permission to take the body of Jesus for burial. In Jewish culture, it was regarded a horrible fate not to be buried. However, the Roman authorities by practice would refuse burying those executed for treason. Joseph presumably would not have known that Pilate didn't give much weight to the charge of treason charged to Jesus, so his asking was an incredible risk to take. To associate with a criminal of the state in this way could have ended badly for Joseph. Thankfully, Pilate granted Joseph's request.

In addition, after John gives us our first acquaintance with Joseph of Arimathea, he then reacquaints us with another secret disciple—Nicodemus. John hints at Nicodemus' fear in following Jesus openly with the reminder that he "had at first come to Jesus by night." Nicodemus was not ready to be publicly identified with

Jesus during his ministry. Now something has changed. John lets us know that he came “bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.” Accounting for conversion from Roman measurements during this period the actual weight would be around 75 pounds. The reversal of Nicodemus’ hesitancy to follow Jesus openly is highlighted not just by his appearance on the scene during the day, but by the exorbitant amount of spices he brings. It was important to use spices for burial in order to reduce the smell of decay. But it was also a way to pay one’s final respects. The price for this amount of spices would cost around 30,000 denarii. To put that into perspective, the annual salary of a legionary was about 108 denarii. Or a peasant family of four could provide oil, wine, and bread for the entire family for a year on 68 denarii. Nicodemus could have hired 278 soldiers for a year or he could have provided a year of essentials for 441 families. Nicodemus chose instead to honor Jesus by giving him an extravagant burial. This lavish gift of spices reveals the deep respect Nicodemus has for Jesus. It was a gift that would provide a burial befitting a king. And that seems to be an important point John wants to raise in this narrative. It’s not so much about the burial as it is about who is being buried. That will make all the difference in how we understand what God is doing on Holy Saturday.

John goes on to provide a few more details about Jesus’ burial like his body being wrapped in linen cloths with the spices which was customary for a Jewish burial. This would be no small task to pull off considering the time constraints. They had to get the body in a tomb before sundown. Because of the hurried nature of the burial, we are told that Jesus is placed in a garden tomb “in the place where he was crucified.” In other words, this tomb was close and therefore a perfect solution to the time challenge. But we are also told that this tomb has never been occupied by another. John doesn’t tell us in his account of the burial that the tomb actually belongs to Joseph. We get that extra bit of detail in Matthew’s account. But what John wants to focus on is that the tomb Jesus is laid in had never been used before. Many of these

tombs that were sealed with a round stone were expensive and used more than once for different people. Once the body had decayed the bones would be placed in a separate place and others could be buried in the same tomb. But Jesus would be the only occupant of this tomb. This would be a one-of-a-kind burial.

Let's look at a few theological points that could be considered from the descriptions of Jesus' burial. As we noted, the burial was hurried "because it was the Jewish day of Preparation." It seems the Father is in a hurry to bury our sins. He is not a God who wants to hold our transgressions against us. He wants our sins dead and buried so we are free of the tomb. He wants to deliver us from our fears, from death and darkness. Also, Jesus kept the Sabbath far beyond any Jewish law could. Jesus truly "rested" on the Sabbath as he was dead. You can't rest any deeper than that. Again, what is important about the burial of Jesus is not the burial, but who is being buried. As Joseph and Nicodemus have hinted to in their actions, the one being buried is a King of highest order. He is the one worth risking all for. He is the one worthy of all our riches and honor. There is something different about this burial. More is going on here than laying a body in a grave. It demands the question, "Who is this man in the tomb on Holy Saturday?"

If you remember our message for Good Friday, you may recall the analogy of Jesus being a sponge on the cross. He was soaking up all the evil, death, darkness, and sin of the world. He was soaking up all that resides in us that keeps us from entering eternal rest with the Father. He was holding our sins against us; he was holding them to himself in order to destroy them on the cross and then give them a proper burial in the tomb. No one else could bury our sins. The tomb was not made to be occupied by anyone except the one who would do the work of burying our sins forever. Like the linen clothes he is wrapped in, he enters the tomb wrapped in our sins. However, as we will see tomorrow on Easter Sunday, when he leaves the tomb,

he does not take the linen clothes with him. Like our sins, he leaves them forever buried.

How may this story then inform how we live on Holy Saturday? Or, with a bigger picture, how does it inform how we live out our days “between the times?” Jesus has left the tomb and returned to the Father. We await his return when all things will be fully made new. In the meantime, there are a few reminders from these reflections of Jesus’ burial that may be helpful.

First, our heavenly Father wants to free you from any fear you are living under. He does not want you to be afraid to follow his Son. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and our Savior who does not invite you into fear, but into his love and freedom. May Joseph and Nicodemus encourage you to go public with your faith in Christ. May the cross draw you to Jesus in a way that frees you from fear and brings you out of the dark.

Second, your sins have been laid to rest in a tomb. That tomb is not for you. It was made for one man only, the only man who could carry our sins away. He has done so, and therefore there is no reason to go searching for buried sins. There is no life in a tomb. Live is lived in Jesus.

Third, if you are struggling to know how to respond on Holy Saturday and if you are in conflict living between the times, remember—the one in the tomb is perfectly at rest. And he invites you to enter his rest that he has with the Father. Jesus does not live in fear and he is not conflicted about his Father. He knows his Father will show up and vindicate him. He knows his Father’s love will not fail. He knows even if he is laid in a tomb, the Father will not leave him there. That’s a rest he kept fully on Holy Saturday, a rest he gives you in himself. The Father is faithful and he can be trusted,

even in death.

Lastly, remember that the One laid in the tomb on Holy Saturday is a King. And not just any king, he is King of kings, and Lord of lords. The Pilates, the religious rulers, the raging empires around us have no power over him. Even death itself has been defeated by this conquering King. If you want to know how to respond on Holy Saturday and every other day “between the times,” look to Jesus and behold your King. Let him draw from you the worship and witness that was on display in Joseph and Nicodemus. Even if you have been hiding in the shadow of fear, Jesus does not leave you there. He calls you forth into worship, a worship that cannot be contained when we see a King as beautiful and mighty as King Jesus. He is your King and he is for you and knows you by name all the way to the grave...and beyond. But that’s another story for tomorrow. Until then, rest in the assurance that Jesus lies in the tomb, securing your freedom from it.

Discussion Questions

- In what ways can you relate the events of Holy Saturday as living “between the times?” As we wait for Jesus’ return, what are the challenges we face in our day to day lives that can tempt us to live as if Jesus is still laid in a tomb?”
- How did Joseph of Arimathea’s responses in the story speak to you personally?
- How did Nicodemus’ response in the story speak to you personally?
- Reflect on the difference it makes to know who was buried on Holy Saturday and not just how he was buried.