

"Waiting for the Kingdom of God"

Imagine a *waiting* room at a doctor's office. What do you usually do in the waiting room? Well, you "wait." You wait, hopefully patiently, for the doctor to see you. If you thought ahead maybe you brought a book to be read. (Hopefully you turned off your cell phone.) But otherwise, you probably just sit there quietly waiting your turn.

When you are in the waiting room, waiting, you probably feel like you are doing nothing. You might be thinking about all the time you are wasting or all the others things you could be getting done. Waiting in the waiting room doesn't seem very productive. It just seems like you are doing nothing. And you probably are.

I'd like to think today about "waiting." Waiting on God. Waiting for him to act, in your life, and in this world. Waiting for him to keep all his good promises. But I hope to show us that waiting in the Biblical sense isn't just about inaction. I think it's far too common that we think waiting is only about inaction. That when we are waiting for something, that it's just like the waiting room at the doctor's office. We wait, and just sit around doing nothing. But Biblical waiting is not about inaction. Biblical waiting is closely related to patience. But patient waiting isn't the same as inaction.

In verse 43, it says that this Joseph of Arimathea was *waiting* for the kingdom of God. What does it mean to wait for something, in a Biblical sense? That's what I'd like us to consider today as we look at this passage. Here we have this Joseph of Arimathea. He was waiting. He was waiting for something *before* Jesus died on the cross. And he was waiting for something *after* Jesus died on the cross. Before the cross, his waiting was a *secret* waiting. After Christ's death on the cross his waiting became *active*. And so I want to look at his waiting before and after the cross. And I want us to think about what transformed his waiting in this passage, from something secret and passive to something public and active. Of course as we think about how this Joseph of Arimathea was waiting for the kingdom of God, it's a challenge for us to each think about how we "wait." What does our waiting as Christians look like? And how does this waiting affect the decisions and choices we each make in life? I hope to answer these questions after we spend some time reflecting on the waiting done here by Joseph of Arimathea.

As we think about Joseph's waiting here, let's begin first by thinking about his secret waiting. Joseph was waiting for the kingdom of God, but it seems this was a secret at first. Just consider who Joseph was. Verse 43 tells us that he was on the council. He was a member of the Sanhedrin that arrested and convicted Jesus. He was a member of the very group that did everything it could to make sure Jesus' teachings were stopped and that he was put to death! And not just that, Joseph was a prominent member on this council. In other words, he was a well respected member of the council. Surely all the members of the council were outwardly respectable people. Otherwise they wouldn't have made it onto the council in the first place. But Joseph was a prominent member among the council members. He was recognized as a leader of the leaders. If you've ever been on a council or a board, you know how this works. There are those people who when they start speaking, people really listen up. Those people who can greatly influence the whole board or council. That's the case in our presbytery meetings as well (example of last credentials committee vote). In theory, each of the elders in the Presbytery have the same authority and the same vote at the end of the day. But there are those certain

elders, those fathers of the faith that the other elders look up to. That when they start speaking, everyone else starts listening. Well that's the kind of leader that Joseph of Arimathea was.

But then read on. Notice what the text goes on to say. "Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God." I think this is intended to surprise us a bit. The Greek is emphatic - he "himself". It puts the word "himself" in there to bring some emphasis, in this case a bit of surprise. A prominent member of the Sanhedrin was waiting for the kingdom of God. In other words, he in some way was a follower of Jesus. Jesus, of course, had made the content of his teaching ministry about the kingdom of God. He started out his ministry by saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel." And so Joseph, a prominent member of the council that had arrested and convicted Jesus, was actually a follower of Jesus! But obviously we're told this as a bit of a surprise, because it was. This was obviously a secret that Joseph had kept to himself.

In fact, the other gospel accounts make this clear. John 19:38 says that Joseph was a secret disciple of Christ. Luke 23 says that he was a good and righteous man who hadn't consented to the decision and actions of the Sanhedrin concerning Jesus.

And so, Joseph of Arimathea was a follower of Christ - waiting for the kingdom of God. But at first, he was *secretly* waiting for the kingdom. Why did he feel the need to keep it a secret? Well don't forget how all of Jesus' disciples fled when he was arrested in Mark 14. The one young man who tried to follow behind almost got himself arrested as well. There was a real threat of trouble for you if you were a follower of Jesus. John's gospel tells us that by that point the Jewish leaders had already publically made known that you'd be put out of the synagogue if you confessed that Jesus is the Christ. Certainly the risks were even higher for a member of the council, because of the great position he could have fallen from. Matthew's gospel tells us Joseph was rich as well. And so Joseph could have lost so much, besides just being arrested. He could have lost his influential position on the Sanhedrin, possibly his money and status; not to mention he could have been basically kicked out of the church. The higher status you have, the more you have to lose, and the more you have to protect yourself. Joseph must have thought that whatever influence he had on the council, it wouldn't have been enough to change the clear attitude of the council that was against Jesus. And so he was "waiting" in secret. By the way, there's a lesson here. Joseph must have assumed his influence wouldn't have had an effect, but how would he know what God would do through him if he had chosen to stand up for his faith? That's the same for us in our relationships. We don't stand up because we think no one will listen - but who knows what God might do through us?

And yet in our passage Joseph's secret waiting turns into an active waiting. He finally decides to go public. He puts his waiting into action in this passage. You see, in one sense, there's not a lot Joseph can do himself to usher in the kingdom of God. What's it really mean to be "waiting for the Kingdom of God?" Isn't God going to work through his Messiah on his own timetable? There's not much any of us can do to speed things up, is there? That's why it's called waiting, isn't it?

Well in one sense that's true. Whenever you see the people of God waiting on God to act, there's certainly an aspect of patience and trust. To wait for the Lord means we patiently trust in faith that he will act. This is especially the case when God has promised something. If God has promised something, then we can with certainty wait patiently for it to come about. It *will* come about. In one real sense, that's what Joseph had been doing when it says he was waiting for the

kingdom of God. He was waiting for God to establish his everlasting kingdom through the Messiah, just as he had promised. But did that mean that there was nothing else Joseph could do in the mean time? Was his waiting to be just passive? Was he just to wait doing nothing? Well, no. According to our passage, Joseph decided there was something he do could even while waiting.

An opportunity for him to serve presented itself, and so he finally took courage and acted. We see that opportunity open up in verse 42. Jesus had died, and now evening had come upon them. Was Jesus going to just hang on the cross, dead all night long? Or would he get a proper burial? The Jews felt very strongly that everyone should get a proper burial. Even an enemy. Not only that, but Scripture actually specifically addressed this situation. In Deuteronomy 21:23, the Law stated that a man who was hung must not remain hanging all night, but that he must be buried the same day of his death. And so God's Word even said that it was the right thing for Jesus to be buried before it grew dark. And so with the evening already coming upon them, Joseph needed to act quickly. And as Mark points out in verse 42, it was Friday. The day before the Sabbath. And so if they didn't get him buried before sundown when Sabbath started, they have to leave him hanging all the way until the Sabbath ended. And so Mark shows us the sense of urgency in getting Jesus buried that evening.

And so Joseph recognized that the pious thing to do for his secret teacher was to make sure he received a proper burial. And so Joseph's waiting for the kingdom of God took on a more active role here. Here he could act in a way consistent with his waiting for the kingdom.

Think about it from this perspective. Joseph was waiting for the kingdom. If you're waiting for the kingdom you should be living in light of the kingdom. In other words, if you're waiting for the kingdom, your morals should be governed by the ethics of kingdom that you're waiting for. You don't need to wait for the kingdom to come to live like one who belongs to the kingdom. That's actually what Jesus taught. To live in light of the coming of the kingdom. To repent because the kingdom was at hand. The imminent coming of the kingdom meant that people should respond by living already like those who belong to the kingdom. That's part of how we express our waiting for the kingdom. Joseph was presented with such an opportunity. Would he discard the secrecy of his waiting and start actively and publically waiting for the kingdom? Even by stepping up to try to give Jesus a proper burial as was the Godly thing to do? Even if it meant he might suffer the consequences for his allegiance to Jesus?

You see it says in verse 43 that Joseph had to take courage when he went to Pilate to ask for the body. Certainly from just the perspective of dealing with the Romans, Joseph's action required courage. Officially, and in theory, the Roman death penalty continued after you died. What I mean, is that when the Romans killed you, it was assumed that part of your punishment was that you wouldn't be buried. In the case of the crucified, you'd be expected to hang there dead, as a sign to any who would oppose the Romans. But, though this was the official thing to do, it wasn't the thing in practice that usually happened. The Roman governors had the authority to make exceptions to this and allow someone to be buried. The general procedure would be that family members would make a request to have the body released to them. This request was almost always granted. However, there was one exception. When someone was convicted for the crime of high treason, this request would almost never be granted on the grounds of principle. Well, here you have Jesus technically convicted on grounds of high treason, in that he was charged with claiming to be the King of the Jews. And here you have someone who wasn't even a family member going to Pilate to ask Jesus' body to be released for a burial. All of this would have taken some courage on the part of Joseph to make

this request. And yet the *real courage* came in that he was revealing his hand to the Jews. People would surely suspect at this point that he had been a secret follower of Jesus. But at this point, he was willing to finally stand up for his faith.

And Joseph didn't just do any half-hearted job here. He provided a nice tomb for Jesus. The description of this tomb cut out of a rock with a stone to close it represented probably the nicest of graves you could get at the time. Other accounts tell us that it had never been used before. Often these sorts of fancy tombs would get reused, with the remains of the previous person moved to some less fancy site after a time. Certainly it was nice to have an unused tomb. And then look at the cloth Joseph used. It's described in verse 46 as fine linen, with the emphasis in the word being that it was the good stuff. It was some fancy, high quality, linen. And notice that Joseph didn't just have this lying around. He bought it. He incurred a cost to provide Jesus with this burial fit for a king. Jesus was born in the lowly picture of a manger. But he was buried in class. Already we are beginning to see how his death looks forward to his glory!

Considering all of Joseph's actions here I believe it's fair to say this was all an act of faith. He put his waiting into action and showed that he still had faith in the coming of the kingdom. Jesus' death didn't stop him from trusting that God would keep his promise. That the kingdom of God would come. Joseph's active waiting here was an expression of faith. Now we don't know what all Joseph believed here. I'd like to say that he expected Jesus to rise from the dead, but I just don't think we have the data that would tell us that. Joseph himself probably didn't know what to think. Joseph obviously had been compelled by Jesus' teaching that the kingdom was imminent. Certainly Joseph's actions here show that he still believed that to be the case. His waiting for the kingdom meant trust and faith. It meant believing that God would act. And so in turn, Joseph acted in faith. He thought that faith in God here meant that he should give Jesus a proper burial. Waiting on God here meant doing what he could in the situation as an expression of faith. He did this, not fully knowing how everything would work itself out, but just waiting for the Lord to work it out.

And so step back for a moment and look at the waiting of Joseph. First it was a secret waiting. Then it became an active waiting. Where was the turning point for Joseph? Well, it's right there in verse 43. We looked at it. He all of a sudden came and took courage. He took courage. His courage transformed what his waiting looked like. He went from secret and passive in his waiting to public and active in his waiting. All because of a little courage. All because of a little change of heart.

Practically speaking, we don't know what caused this change of heart. When I say practically speaking, I mean from Joseph's outward perspective. If we were in Joseph's shoes, what things influenced him to step up to the plate and take some courage here? We know in our own life, that certain things influence us to have courage and take action. Sometimes it's a respected leader who gets in our face and tells us to stand up for what we believe. Sometimes it's a heart wrenching movie that gets us to reflect on our own life and make some changes. We don't know what did it for Joseph. Maybe it was seeing how Jesus died on the cross. Maybe it was seeing the centurion cry out that surely Jesus was the Son of God. Practically speaking, we don't know.

But we do know, don't we? Ultimately we know that the transformation in Joseph's life was from God. God transformed Joseph's waiting. God is the one who ultimately worked the courage in Joseph's heart. That's what God is doing in the lives of his disciples. He's growing us. He's working on our hearts. He gave

Joseph the courage he needed to start expressing his waiting in an active and public way.

This, of course, is why Jesus came to the cross. He came to the cross to transform us. To transform his disciples. That's why Jesus is the author and the perfecter of faith according to Hebrews. Jesus is not only bringing us to initial faith, he is making us more like himself. Jesus courageously, actively, publically, did what he was called to do in order to usher in the kingdom. He calls each of us to do the same. And he promises to give us the strength to do it. He is actively transforming us as we actively wait in faith. That's what he was doing in Joseph's life, and that's what he does in our life.

This, of course, is part of what the coming of the kingdom even looks like. Joseph was waiting for the kingdom of God. Whether he realized it or not, the kingdom was already present in his life. When he put his waiting into action, it was Christ's kingdom rule working in his heart. He was living out the kingdom by living in obedience. And of course that's the case for all of us who are Christian. We know that the final realization of God's kingdom is still ahead. We are still waiting for it. It will come when Jesus comes again. But Scripture tells us that we already have a foretaste of the kingdom already. We already experience the kingdom in our lives. We experience it spiritually. Scripture describes this in different ways. In one place it describes the Spirit as a guarantee (2 Cor 1:22). That means that the Spirit is a down payment or a deposit of the kingdom. He brings the Kingdom into our hearts spiritually. In another place we're told that our kingdom inheritance is reserved in heaven for us, but we are kept by the power of God until we receive that inheritance in its fullness (1 Peter 1:4-5). In another place (Eph 1-2) we're told that we already are seated with Christ in the heavenly blessings, that we've already been blessed with every spiritual blessing, even while we await the final display of his riches to be revealed in the age to come. That day when the kingdom comes in its fullness. So already we taste of the kingdom. While we wait for the kingdom to come, we already taste of it. It's already at work in our lives. That's a special sort of waiting.

My friends, Jesus Christ came to usher in the kingdom. Joseph of Arimathea was waiting for this. Many others were too. With the coming of Jesus, with his death on the cross, with his resurrection, the kingdom is all the more imminent. It is near. Will you wait for the kingdom? Will you turn to Jesus in faith, waiting for his return? If you are waiting for the kingdom of God, it means you are trusting in God's promises. It means that you believe that Jesus is your Savior and you trust him as your Lord. You serve Christ as the king of the kingdom that you are waiting for. It means that you are patient in your waiting. You know that God's timing is perfect. You want his return so badly, but you trust that it will happen right on time.

If you are waiting for his kingdom, it's my prayer that God would grow you in your waiting. That your waiting would not be secretive or passive. But that you would actively and publically wait, just as Joseph of Arimathea started to do here.

Let's think about these two aspects of our waiting: the public aspect and the active aspect. Let's think about the public aspect first. Let's pray for God's courage to be publically waiting for Jesus. You know if you are in a doctor's office waiting room, it doesn't do you any good to just show up and sit in the waiting room. No, you first go and check in. You publically declare that you are there waiting. Let's do that in our spiritual life as well. If you are waiting for the Lord, let's let the Lord and everyone else know it. Let's have our life be a public testimony that your hope is in God. The world waits for so many things. Today people are waiting for the stock market to turn around. Others might be

waiting for the dream job or the perfect spouse. These things are uncertain, but when people really believe in them, you can see it. They make it publicly known. God calls us to be public witnesses for what we are waiting for. For what we are hoping for. And if we are waiting for the Lord, what we wait for will certainly come to pass.

But our waiting doesn't mean inaction. That's where the waiting room example goes wrong. Our waiting isn't just sitting around doing nothing. It's not to be a passive thing. Yes, God's plans and promises will come to pass despite what we do. But God uses those who wait on the Lord to bring about his promises. And so if we are waiting, our waiting should be like what Joseph of Arimathea did. He acted in godliness. He lived for the kingdom. He acted in faith.

Saints, this isn't just about proclaiming Jesus in everything you do. It's not just about being a witness for Christ. It's not just about inviting people to church. Sure, it's that. But it's also more than that. I'm talking here about everything you do in life. I'm talking about having biblical patience and decision making.

You see, sometimes I see Christians say this. I'm praying about some decision I have in life to make: What college to attend, who to pursue in a relationship, what career path I should take, etc, etc. They then say, "But I haven't made the decision yet because I'm waiting on the Lord." That sounds spiritual. The Psalms talk a lot about waiting on God. But in the past, I've heard this used out of context way more than I'd like to hear. Don't get me wrong, I strongly encourage you to pray about the decisions you have to make. I'm not opposed to looking for God to provide open doors of opportunity for you. But sometimes people can use this "waiting on the Lord" as an excuse for inaction. As an excuse for indecision. Basically they are looking or hoping for some sort of supernatural intervention in their life that they can then use to judge by which to make the decision. It can all be very mystical and charismatic, and frankly, dangerous. They might mean they are waiting on the Lord and then looking for some sign. Either one of two bad things then happens. One, a sign never comes and they are frozen in inaction. Not making the decision that they need to make. They then might start to panic wondering if they missed what God was trying to tell them, or worse that God has stopped working in their life and so something must be wrong. This can shipwreck people's faith. The other bad thing that can happen is this. Something that might look like a sign to them comes along and then they make their decision based on how they interpret that sign. This can become very subjective. It's not that I doubt God is at work in our lives, but our ability to correctly interpret what God's doing in our life is not always so accurate. Especially if we are just using our own subjective wisdom and emotions.

Instead, I propose a better way. I encourage us to actively wait, according to God's Word. If you have a decision to make in life, search out God's Word. Pray for wisdom to apply what God's Word has to say about your decision. Pray that your sin would not cloud your judgment. Maybe even get counsel from an elder or pastor. In other words, assess your situation biblically. This is using the objective Word of God to direct our actions. We can have certain trust that God's word is directing us correctly. We can't have certain trust that we are fully interpreting whatever divine sign in our life we might think we have. In any way we think God is at work in our life, we must check it against his Word. That's our foundation. That's where God tells us what his kingdom rule is like. That's where he tells us the ethics of the kingdom. This is what waiting on the Lord is all about. It's about actively trusting in God according to his Word. Trusting that when you prayerfully act in faith according to his Word, that he will ultimately bring about

his plans. His plans for our life, plans to prosper us and not to harm us; plans for his kingdom.

Joseph of Arimathea could have tried to interpret the times. He could have thought that it would have been easier for Jesus to rise again if he wasn't buried and locked in a stone tomb. But God's Word said that he should be buried, and so that's what Joseph did. He actively waited for God to act, but his actions were according to Scripture. We too must wait for God. But let's wait in the biblical sense. Biblical waiting is not about inaction, waiting for some mystical experience to somehow tell you what to do. It's about proactively trusting in God's promises that as you seek to be faithful to God's Word, that he will certainly be faithful to all his good promises. Like his promise to return and usher us into eternity. Let's actively wait for that great day. Amen.

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