

# Good Friday

## ABIDING LIGHT

John 19:31- 42

Good Friday

Analysis by Dana Bjorlin

31 Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. 32 Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. 33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. 35 (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) 36 These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." 37 And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

38 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. 39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 41 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. 42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

*Note: Although John's Passion Narrative makes no mention of the darkness covering the earth from noon till 3 on that Friday, yet this account still has as its background John's overall contrasting of the light from Christ and the darkness of the forces opposed to him. See 1:4-9, 3:19-21, 8:12, 9:5, 11:9, 10, 12:35-36, 46. This understanding stands behind the following study. While considering this contrast in the context of the end of that Crucifixion Day, phrases from Henry Lyte's hymn "Abide with Me" (#272 in LBW, #490 in LW, & #629 in ELW) kept appearing in the study process. While still a parish pastor, I recall using this hymn as part of many of our Good Friday services.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Fast Falls the Eventide**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Out from the Shadows*

Ironically, as the sun's shadows begin to lengthen on this horrendous day, two men step away from anonymity to care for the obviously dead body (vv. 33 & 34) of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea (v. 38), a secret disciple, and Nicodemus (v. 39) who had first come to Jesus by night (cf. 3:1ff & 7:50) now throw caution to the wind, abandon their secrecy and let their true loyalties be known. Yet despite their honesty in having come to the light (of Jesus) so that their deeds might be seen (3:21), they are now racing the darkness of the approaching evening (9:4 & 12:35) and the Sabbath day when deeds must cease.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** : *The Darkness Deepens*

We are told that Joseph had been afraid of the Jewish

authorities (v. 38). Perhaps he had good reason to fear. In the other gospels, Joseph is described as “rich” (Matt. 27) or “a member of the council” (Mark 15 & Lk 23); Nicodemus is “one of” the chief priests and Pharisees (John 7:50). We can infer that fear of losing their status in the community must have played a role in their previous reticence and cowering hush-hush, but now something else seems to impel them. Do they regret that they had not previously stood up and more passionately defended him before the authorities and in the circles of power? Do they feel guilty that they allowed such a travesty of justice to proceed as condemning an innocent man to death? Or are they simply interested in seeing to it that Jesus receives a decent burial in an age where “proper burial” was intimately tied to how a person would ultimately be remembered?

However regret, guilt, or even the altruism of concern for another’s reputation only reveal a failure on these men’s part. They rush to bury Jesus’ body “according to the custom of the Jews” (v. 40). All things like these actually point to a reliance upon the law instead of upon the one just crucified. Doing “the right thing” – despite appearing somewhat admirable and regardless of the reason – just won’t do. As “Jews who believe in” Jesus, Joseph and Nicodemus, fail to continue in his word. They fail in knowing the truth that can make them free (8:31-32). They remain in the dark, even while the light lingers in the approaching eventide.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Failing Helpers, Fleeting Comforts***

The law cannot prevent the inevitable coming of the darkness. It can only temporarily deal with it. While Joseph and Nicodemus have left the shade and come to the light, this is only a temporary respite. Jesus is now dead. Their actions of kindness cannot change this fact; nor will these actions avert the coming darkness of night. Their attempts to “do good” are actually much

like the Jewish authorities' desire to clear the bodies off of the crosses so they might observe the coming Sabbath and Passover.

Execution sites spruced up or bodies out of sight change nothing but the scenery. Darkness, however, means that the scenery is no longer important. Darkness signals the end of the ability to change anything or to make it "seem" like things are different. When darkness overtakes you, you no longer know where you're heading (12:35).

## **PROGNOSIS: Heaven's Morning Breaks**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *Hold up His Cross*  
What Joseph and Nicodemus (and all of Christ's followers) seemed to miss on that Friday was the promise Jesus had earlier declared: "When I am lifted up... (I) will draw all people to myself" (12:32). His death on the cross was more all-inclusive than some commemoration that would draw people to Jerusalem (the Passover); it is bigger and much better than a ritualistic day of resting from the usual daily grind (the Sabbath). In fact, Jesus himself declares that "everyone who believes in me (shall) not remain in the darkness" (12:46). In the Gospel of John, Jesus' death is repeatedly tied to his resurrection. And in his death and resurrection, he draws all sorts of people to this believing that does not remain in darkness. Therefore Jesus' followers need not worry about the approaching darkness after death, nor of the darkness that shuts down earthly endeavors.

The statement from the beginning of John's Gospel now is completed in the soon-to-be-here resurrection of Jesus: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:5).

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Shining through the Gloom*

A glance down to the first verse beyond the selected reading, shows Mary Magdalene appearing at the nearby tomb “while it was still dark” (20:1)! She summons other disciples who come running in the eerie daybreak to witness the tomb’s being empty (20:4). In the shadows, one of these two will “see and believe” (20:8). “Gloomy” Mary doesn’t first recognize her Lord as his silhouette brightens (20:14-15). But soon she will recognize him and tell all who will hear (20:16-18)! The one who died and was buried now lives! Fear of persecuting authorities, of death, or failing to perform the best of social conventions can now all be cast away.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Shadows That Flee*  
Realizing the strength of the light of Christ shining in the darkness, means that the shadows of secrecy have been overcome along with the fears that enforce that secrecy. Death too has been conquered and overcome. No longer do the followers of Jesus need to race the darkness, fearing the future, and getting their deeds noticed. The pace of our lives is allowed to slow down, though we are still tempted to rush. We can stand beside the cross because we are not threatened by the darkness. The Lord who died on that cross abides with us. We can even change the way the hymn sounds: Through death to life, the Lord, abides with me!