

# Awaiting the Kingdom of God\*

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## Scripture Reading:

Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

Luke 23:50-54 (NIV)

Do you have any questions that you have long been waiting for to be answered? I study mathematics. In mathematics, there are too many things that we cannot understand. Problems that many people have tried to solve but in vain are called unsolved problems, and there are some unsolved problems that I myself have been working on for many years.

I started to seek the truth in the Bible when I was a high school student, and there are some problems, some questions that I have had since then.

One such question is about the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 5, verse 20: For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that

of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The first question I asked a pastor after I began to read the Bible was about this part. I don't remember exactly the pastor's answer. Probably he said something like this: "You will never enter the kingdom of heaven unless your righteousness is completely different from that of the scribes and Pharisees, that is, unless you have the righteousness of God, not the righteousness by your own action."

As you know, in the Bible, the scribes and Pharisees are always criticized by the Lord Jesus. In short, they always appear as bad guys, almost without an exception.

The scribes and Pharisees tried to completely observe the law given by God. But as we read the Gospels, we find that some of their conducts were wide of the mark, as the Lord Jesus pointed out. But can we say that our righteousness, based on the belief in Lord Jesus as the Savior, is really completely different from that of the scribes and Pharisees?

For some of my questions, I've found the answer or a clue. One such question is, "What would you do if you were told that you would die in a month?"

When I was in high school, I carried a small copy of the New Testament in my pocket. I wrote down many things in it. And one of them is, "Even if I knew that the world would go to pieces tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree, by Martin Luther." In fact, many years later, when I attended a lecture by Professor Yoshikazu Tokuzen at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, he referred to this word and said,

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“This is a very Lutheran word, but there are no written records.” Professor Tokuzen is a brother of Mr. Yoshimasa Tokuzen, who leads the Joyful Ringers at ICU church. Professor Yoshikazu Tokuzen is an expert on Luther, so the word may not be Luther’s.

I think I have gotten off the track. The answer I got when I was a high school student was that you should live in such a way that even if you were told that you would die in a month, you could say, “I will continue to live as I do now.” You should live in such a way that you can say, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.”

But I am still not sure what “planting my apple tree” means. What kind of way of living does this mean?

Since the spring term of 2003, I have held a Bible-reading class at my house on campus, from 7:30 to 9 in the evening every week. Several times, there was only one student besides me, but since I began to put up an announcement on the campus homepage, there have been about ten people at every class. We cover one chapter in the Bible in two to four weeks. I prepare some questions in advance and we think about them. When the students ask too many questions and discussions don’t lead to any conclusion, I don’t say anything definite, and we read on, leaving the questions unresolved, because I want the students to read the Bible slowly and carefully, asking themselves the questions.

Thanks to the students, this class has become a good opportunity for me to discover new things, to be taught something, and to ask new questions. Recently a number of non-Japanese students have participated, and some visitors from abroad came, so sometimes I find it difficult to make long comments because I am busy acting as a translator. But I enjoy reading the Bible carefully together with several people every week.

My wife Setsuko always prepares delicious tea and cakes, so perhaps some students are looking forward to them rather than the Bible.

Last semester we had our 100th class. This number is less than a tenth of the number of reading classes held by the respectable professor Kazuaki Saito, who passed away the other day. But I’d like to continue my class as a place for students and me to ask questions and meet challenges by reading the Bible together. Please remember and pray for us.

We’ve been reading Gospel of Luke these past few years. We’ve just begun reading the last chapter, chapter 24. Usually we study a chapter in two to four weeks, but chapter 23 took us seven weeks. Today, I’d like to reflect on Joseph of Arimathea, who appears in the last part of chapter 23.

Let’s look at today’s portion of Scripture. After Jesus died on the cross, a member of the council named Joseph went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus, and he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid.

There are several other Josephs in the Bible, so in order to distinguish him, he is described as “Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea”. The Bible tells us about Joseph of Arimathea only in relation to Jesus’ burial, but he is recorded in all the four gospels. It may be interesting to compare the differences, but let us sum up Joseph based on the four gospels.

According to Luke, Joseph is described as “a good and righteous man”. And “he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.” Also, “he had not agreed to the plan and action of the council.” This means that he did not agree to arresting and killing Jesus.

But according to Mark, the council decided to kill Jesus unanimously, so if we take this literally, Joseph must have been absent or could not do anything with this decision that deserved to be recorded.

According to Matthew, Joseph was “a rich man”. In the fortified city of Jerusalem, he possessed “a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid”, so this is enough proof of his wealth.

It is written, “He was also a disciple of Jesus.” But according to John, he “was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews.” He was a rich man, had a high status in Jewish society, and a member of the council. The leaders of the people had agreed to kill Jesus, so it must have been difficult for him to proclaim that he was a disciple of Jesus.

According to Mark, Joseph went “boldly” to Pilate. Jesus was crucified and died about 3 o’clock on Friday, so he had to be buried by the sunset on Friday, when the Sabbath began on the Jewish calendar. It was near the Vernal Equinox Day, so probably the sun went down about six o’clock. According to John, Joseph “asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus.”

Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 22 and 23 say: When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.

So, probably Joseph thought he must not leave Jesus there. What do you think about Joseph?

What impressed me very much when I read this part was that the Bible described him as “awaiting the kingdom of God”, which is the title of today’s sermon. In Luke, there are two other similar expressions. Both of them concern Simeon and Anna, who blessed Jesus when he was still a baby. Luke says in chapter 2, verse 22, “he was looking forward to the consolation of Israel”, and in verse 38, “she began to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” But there is no other such expression. Were other

people not waiting for the kingdom of God?

Wasn’t it all the Jews who were waiting for the Savior, the Messiah? If the scribes or Pharisees had been asked, they would have said they were certainly waiting for the Messiah.

It is said that, in the Bible, the kingdom of God and the rule of God are almost the same. Luke used the expression “waiting for the kingdom of God” only for Joseph of Arimathea. I think this is because, although other people were also eager to be saved, they were not waiting for the rule of God from the bottom of their heart.

If “to be saved” means “to realize one’s wish”, there are many people who wish to be saved, but there aren’t many people who sincerely wish God’s will to be realized. And Joseph was a man who “was waiting for the kingdom of God.”

Joseph’s hope was in Jesus. But he couldn’t let it out. He couldn’t do anything at the trial of Jesus. And now, seeing Jesus dead on the cross, Joseph was in the depths of despair. Or he might have had some regrets. But at the very moment when he lost all his hope, he went boldly to Pilate and asked him to let him take away the body of Jesus.

It was Friday evening in the Passover, so perhaps he was planning to have the feast of Passover that evening with his family and relatives. Soon the feast of unleavened bread would begin, so he might have been responsible for the preparation. If he touched a dead body, he would become unclean. He might have been afraid of losing his status. But he threw off all these anxieties and acted “boldly”. Surely Joseph made a “bold” confession of faith.

But, from a different viewpoint, his action may seem beside the point. If he had said something at the council, if he had acted a little earlier, things might have been different. Also, the linen cloths were left by themselves at the resurrection, so perhaps his action didn’t have any significance at all in terms of God’s action.

But the Bible says this was the man that “was waiting for the kingdom of God.”

What about us, our life of faith? Are we waiting for the kingdom of God in our daily life? As I said at the beginning, I cannot say that my righteousness is completely different from that of the scribes and Pharisees. I cannot help thinking that I am not waiting for the kingdom of God; I just wish to be saved the way I want to be.

The other day, in another sermon, the following part of the Book of Ezekiel was read: O mortal, how does the wood of the vine surpass all other wood—the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest? I cannot help confessing that my faith is no better than that of the scribes and Pharisees.

But God is the one who listens to our confession of faith, even if we don’t know where our faith should be. There was a member of the church I went to in my high school days who was always engaged in some service quietly and talked very little. One evening, in a prayer meeting, he made a confession. He said, “This part has always been a consolation to me,” and read the Revelation of St. John, chapter 3, verse 8: I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

He said, “I don’t have power, nor do I have strong faith, but I put my hope on God, who has made himself known through the Lord Jesus. He knows very well that I am weak, and he has set before me “a door that no one is able to shut”. I cannot do very much, but I’d like to obey Jesus and trust God.” I was very impressed by what he said.

Awaiting the kingdom of God. To be honest, I don’t know very well what the kingdom of God, or the rule of God is like. But God showed himself through Jesus Christ. “He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoulder-

ing wick.” (Matthew 12:20) When I was a sinner, Lord Jesus died for me. Lord Jesus loves us and invites us to love each other. I think I can trust in the love of our Lord Jesus.

Our daily acts of faith almost always end in failure. Even if we do something “boldly”, it may be of no use for the kingdom of God. But even so, we are invited to the life in which we don’t put hope on ourselves but wait for the kingdom of God. Whether we have to risk our lives and make a very important decision, or we do things which we think are not very important, I think there is a way to live by asking for the kingdom of God, to live on faith.

It is difficult to learn to live in such a way that we have no regrets even if we die tomorrow. Yet, it may be possible to live in such a way that we keep asking ourselves whether we are merely hoping to be saved the way we want to be, or do we truly trust in the Lord Jesus and wait for the kingdom of God, the rule of God, asking the Lord to come. God is waiting for us to respond by truly trusting in the Lord Jesus and by waiting for His kingdom. Even if the world comes to an end tomorrow, let us keep our faith, in which we trust in God and wait for the kingdom of God.

Let us pray.

**Prayer:** Our heavenly Father. You know that we lack faith. But may we learn from the courage of Joseph of Arimathea so that we may have faith and wait for the kingdom in which your will is done. And lead us so that your will may become our will. Amen.

*Translated by Reiji Yamaguchi*