**Question: "Who was Joseph of Arimathea?"

Answer:** Joseph of Arimathea was a biblical figure who played an important role in the burial of Jesus Christ. His account can be found in each of the four Gospels: [Matthew 27:57–60](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2027.57%E2%80%9360); [Mark 15:42–46](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2015.42%E2%80%9346); [Luke 23:50–53](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2023.50%E2%80%9353); and [John 19:38–42](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%2019.38%E2%80%9342). He is called “Joseph of Arimathea” because “he came from the Judean town of Arimathea” ([Luke 23:51](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2023.51)) and to distinguish him from other Josephs in the Bible.

While there is not much information in the Bible about Joseph of Arimathea, there are certain things we can glean from the text. In [Luke 23:50](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2023.50), we learn that Joseph was actually a part of the Council, or [Sanhedrin](https://www.gotquestions.org/Sanhedrin.html)—the group of Jewish religious leaders who called for Jesus’ crucifixion. However, as we read on to verse 51, we see that Joseph was opposed to the Council’s decision and was in fact a secret follower of Jesus (see also [Mark 15:43](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2015.43)). Joseph was a wealthy man ([Matthew 27:57](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2027.57)), although the source of his wealth is unknown. In addition, the Bible refers to Joseph as a “good and upright man” ([Luke 23:50](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2023.50)).

After Jesus’ death on the cross, Joseph, at great risk to himself and his reputation, went to the Roman governor [Pilate](https://www.gotquestions.org/Pontius-Pilate.html) to request Jesus’ body. [Nicodemus](https://www.gotquestions.org/Nicodemus-in-the-Bible.html), the Pharisee who had visited Jesus at night to ask questions about God’s Kingdom ([John 19:39](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%2019.39); cf. [John 3](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%203)), accompanied Joseph. The two men were granted custody of Jesus’ body, and they immediately began to prepare the body for burial. Following Jewish custom, they wrapped the body in strips of linen and mixed in myrrh and aloe. However, it was the Day of Preparation—the sixth day of the week, just before the Jewish Sabbath—and it was late in the day. So Joseph and Nicodemus hurriedly placed Jesus in Joseph’s own tomb, located in a garden near the place of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Unbeknownst to Joseph and Nicodemus, their choice to put Jesus in Joseph’s tomb fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy spoken hundreds of years before Jesus’ death: “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, *and with the rich in his death*, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth” ([Isaiah 53:9](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa%2053.9), emphasis added). This is one of the many prophecies that have confirmed Jesus’ identity as the Messiah and Son of God.

The day after Jesus’ burial, the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate to request that the stone Joseph had placed in front of the tomb be sealed, and a guard posted, for three days. They cited Jesus’ assertion that He would rise after three days and claimed the disciples might attempt to steal the body in order to fabricate a resurrection ([Matthew 27:63–64](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2027.63%E2%80%9364)). Their precautions were for naught, as Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, just as He had predicted ([Matthew 28](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2028)).

Many spurious stories and legends have arisen regarding Joseph. Some purport that Joseph of Arimathea was the uncle of Jesus’ mother, Mary. However, the Bible makes no such connection, so the claim is unsubstantiated. In addition, Joseph supposedly made many trips to Britain for trade and is said to have eventually brought the gospel to that country. Again, though, the Bible is silent about Joseph after Jesus’ burial, so we cannot know for sure what path he took later in life. What we do know is what we find in the Scriptures: Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man and part of the Sanhedrin, and he procured Jesus’ body and laid it in his own tomb—from which Jesus would rise again in power three days later. <https://www.gotquestions.org/Joseph-of-Arimathea.html>

“The question of the motive for Joseph’s request for the body of Jesus is not easily decided. It has been suggested that he made the request of Pilate as a favor to the disciples. But we are then led to ask why a leading Jew, probably a member of the Sanhedrin, would risk his reputation to do a favor for some frightened, desparing Galilean followers of a man condemned by Roman and Jewish authorities alike” (*IDB* 2.980).

According to Roman tradition, a crucified criminal would usually remain on the cross for several days so the birds and vultures would destroy the corpse. Because of Jewish law, the Romans hastened the death of a crucified Jewish victim and allowed the body to be taken down and buried before nightfall.

Early Christian tradition was convinced that being buried in a “rich man’s” tomb was a fulfillment of prophecy from Isaiah 53:9. This chapter of Isaiah is a description of the “suffering servant” or the crucifixion of the Messiah.

*Isa. 53:9
And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.*

Albert Gilmore gives us an account of Joseph’s role in the introduction of Christianity to England:

 “In England there persists a very pleasing tradition connecting Joseph with the founding of the magnificent cathedral at Glastonbury, now an impressive ruin. Joseph was a merchant, runs the tradition, who came to Cornwall for a supply of tin, a metal which the mines of Cornwall yielded to commerce even in that distant day. Joseph and a dozen companions landed near the Bristol Channel, were received by the King, a Briton, Arviragus by name. Although not accepting the type of religion which they represented to him, the king did grant them a building site for a chapel on the Isle of Marsh. A chapel was built of wattles, the beginning of the great cathedral, and tradition holds that this event marked the introduction of Christianity in England. It is alleged that these events followed close upon the crucifixion” (Gilmore 284).

Joseph figures into other traditions relating to the Holy Grail:

“According to later legend, when the disciples went forth as missionaries, Philip led a company of believers to Gaul (modern-day France) and from there commissioned Joseph to lead a party to Britain. It is said that Joseph landed near Glastonbury and climbed its famous tor, a high grassy hill. As he stopped to rest, he thrust his staff into the ground. It took root and flowered as the Glastonbury thorn, a hawthorn that blooms twice a year, during the spring and at Christmastime.

“Tradition further credits Joseph with building a structure of poles and branches that became the first church in Britain. The motive behind this legend is obvious. Every nation in Christendom wanted to trace its roots back to the Apostles. First choice would have been an actual visit by one of the Twelve. Failing that, storytellers had to settle for a second-hand connection. To compensate for this status, a later story arose that Jesus had visited England as a boy, escorted by a merchant uncle who was none other than Joseph of Arimathea. Celtic mythology made much of a magic cup that the hero in epic tales had to seek and find. In later folklore the cup became the chalice used at the Last Supper, brought to Britain by Joseph, and then mysteriously lost. The quest for the chalice (or Holy Grail) is central to stories told of the legendary King Arthur” (*AJ*23)