

A Prelude to Crucifixion (Mat. 26.1-16)

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Matthew 26:1-13 When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ² "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." ³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, ⁴ and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. ⁵ But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people." ⁶ Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷ a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. ⁸ And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? ⁹ For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." ¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹ For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Introduction

Matthew 26.1a gives another loosely knit thread in the structure of Matthew's Gospel: "when Jesus had finished all these sayings." The writer states himself like this in five places, and they give a rough and ready outline of the book. Each thread in the structure looks back to a great speech: 7.28 looks back to the Sermon on the Mount, 11.1 looks back to the first Great Commission, 13.53 looks back to kingdom parables, 19.1 looks back to relationships in the royal church-family and 26.1 looks back to kingdom consummation. The introduction to the book paves the way to the Lord's public ministry (1-4). The conclusion of the book covers the events leading to, and culminating in, His death and resurrection (26-28). Therefore, here is a way to think through the book of Matthew ("kingdom" can go in front of the five sections):

Introduction (Chapters 1-4)

Sermon (5-7)

Commission (8-10)

Parables (11-13)

Relationships (14-18)

Consummation (19-25)

Conclusion (Chapters 26-28)

Among the references to structure, 26.1a stands out as the only one that uses the word *all* (He **finished all these sayings**). Clearly, we have now come to the concluding section of the book. All the sayings, that is, all the great speeches of Jesus that Matthew wanted to present to his readers are now on record. Through the teachings of these speeches (the Sermon, commission, parables, relationships, and consummation), we understand the conclusion of the ministry of Christ on earth, just as the conclusion helps us grasp the point of all the speeches. It is to the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew that we now turn beginning today with "A Prelude to Crucifixion" (26.1-16). This prelude has four scenes: Jesus predicting His crucifixion, the leaders plotting His murder, Mary anticipating His burial, and Judas seeking to betray Him.

1A. Jesus predicts His crucifixion

In general, we know that the main events that conclude the ministry of Christ are His death and resurrection. These main events are part of a larger story, and that story begins with the fourth prediction by Jesus of His death. **When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ² "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified"** (26.1-2). The previous predictions of His death (16.21-28; 17.22-23; 20.17-19) give more detail, but this one is more specific, even naming the day that He will be delivered up to crucifixion: **after two days**.

2A. The leaders plan Christ's death

The chief priests and elders made up the Sanhedrin, the ruling body and Supreme Court of the nation of Israel. They gathered in the palace of the high priest, Caiaphas.

³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, ⁴ and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. ⁵ But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people" (26.3-5).

These people are not just civil leaders; they are religious leaders. Thus, it is astounding to learn that they made plans that would lead to the arrest and death of Jesus. You would think that their meeting would include the reading of the OT Scriptures and prayer. You would think that they would seek God's guidance as to how to care for the people of God. Moreover, you would think that they would show great respect to the Lord Jesus. Instead, these shepherds conspire to commit murder and to do so in a "sly" way (by stealth to arrest and kill Jesus, 26.4).

These shepherds do not love the sheep; they are not true and good shepherds. They seek to kill the Good Shepherd of the sheep, but because of His popularity among the people, *they want to avoid taking action "during the Feast"* (26.5). This seems to be a stage along the way in their planning. They have conspired to kill the Lord Jesus before. They changed their plans with the passage of time. Eventually, they do see to His arrest in secrecy and to His death *during the Feast* with the help of Judas. Like Judas, the men of the Sanhedrin were opportunists (cf. Mat. 26.16). These religious leaders are guilty of premeditated murder. They fear the people, but they have no fear of God before their eyes. They do not want to just sabotage, discredit, expose, disqualify, sideline or marginalize, but to kill.

3A. Mary anticipates the burial of Christ

From the Gospel of John (12), we know that the woman Matthew mentions is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. We also know from John that Matthew's account is topical and not chronological because this anointing took place six days before the Passover (12.1, even before the triumphal entry). Matthew places it within the narrative that took place two days before the Passover (26.2, **after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified**). Note four things about this event.

1) Matthew flashes back

The anointing is a flash back in the story telling by Matthew. As He narrates the unfolding of events that bring us to a pivotal point, the covenant of betrayal between the Sanhedrin and Judas (26.14-16), he flashes back a few days earlier to what happened in the house of Simon the leper.

Matthew presents the anointing in Bethany as a direct prelude to the suffering and death of Christ that is imminent. By it, he gives a statement of the gospel that stands in marked contrast to the covenant of betrayal. He puts the anointing between the plotting of the leaders and the covenant with Judas.

2) Mary honors Christ

⁶ Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷ a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. ⁸ And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? ⁹ For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." ¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹ For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."

Intuitively, Mary senses that the end of the Lord's life is near, even if she does not grasp fully His announcements regarding what will happen in just a few days. She gathers more to heart than the other disciples do. Therefore, she senses that the time is short for her to honor Christ in a special way. She chooses to anoint His head with oil. Can we understand doing something like this? Briefly, anointing with oil was a symbolic custom that honored a person by saying something to this effect, "Your presence brings a sweet smelling fragrance to our home."

Some oils are very expensive, imported as they were from distant lands. Some calculate this **alabaster flask of very expensive ointment** to be worth a year's wages. Does it seem extreme to pour out a year's wages in an anointing that took just a few minutes? Let us imagine that Jesus were present with us here today. If you had a year's wages in the bank, could you take that money, buy some oil, and anoint the head of the Savior with it? Would it seem extreme, even foolish? Would you argue that there are better ways to spend that money, such as spending it on the poor (of course, you do not want it for yourself)? That is what the disciples did: **when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? ⁹ For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor."**

However, we should imagine again that Jesus is physically present with us today. It seems clear that in the presence of Christ, this act of love and honor would be very fitting. Every other use of our money would fade away into the background. No cost is too great in acts of love, honor, and worship. Of course, He is not here physically and that is a great difference.

3) The poor are in perspective

Clearly, displays of honor mean more than money though at first it sounds like being heavenly minded and no earthly good. Nevertheless, it is a matter of priorities. Jesus is not saying, "Do not love your neighbor." The poor and needy are put in perspective for this unusual act relates to the unique event of the death of the Son of Man. **For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.** He is saying that to worship Him by sacrificing of our possessions is supremely important, even more important than trying to solve the problem of poverty. No gift to Christ is too great or too costly.

4) The gospel goes forth

Jesus defended Mary and stated that this anointing prepared Him for burial. Of course, she did not literally prepare Him for burial. That comes upon a person's death. Therefore, it was a symbolic preparation for burial. Jesus uses her action to remind the disciples again about His coming death, which has its seal in His burial. The Son of Man has a short amount of time to do His work on the earth, and, remarkably, soon they will bury Him in it. **¹² In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her (26.12-13).** Her act was a beautiful thing. That is how Jesus received it. Jesus so received it and announced the fact to all for the record until He returns (cf. each servant steps forward with his money, his life in his hands on the final day).

4A. Judas seeking to betray the Lord Jesus

¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him (26.14-16).

Part of this initial prelude to crucifixion is the action of another disciple, Judas. He is one of the twelve, a fact that makes His actions all the more intense. He is among those of the inner circle who have special access to the Lord Jesus. He sees all that Jesus does; He hears all that Jesus says, but He fails to see and hear Him. He fails to see and hear the gospel that Mary hears and confesses in a symbolic act of worship by giving, by sacrificing of her possessions. We know that when Judas complained of her wasteful display of emotion, he had his own pocketbook in mind *because he was a thief*. He was such a hypocritical deceiver: he feigned concern for the poor. While the other disciples were indignant toward her because they were ignorant, Judas chimed in with them because he was greedy. The Gospel of John tells us that he cared not for the poor, but used to help himself to the money collected for the poor (Jn. 12.6).

Apparently, he is not able to pilfer enough to satisfy his greed, so he goes to the chief priests with a proposition: "give me some money and I will deliver Christ to you." This suggests a change in plans for the leaders; they are now ready to apprehend Jesus during the feast by the aid of a betrayer.

Thus, we have another scene in this prelude to crucifixion. Jesus predicts it, the leaders plot it, Mary anticipates it, and Judas seeks to implement it. The prelude reveals the fact that

opportunity knocks on the doors of human history. Jesus seizes the opportunity for obedience to the will of the Father. The Sanhedrin seizes the opportunity for premeditated murder to vent their hatred and envy. Mary seizes the opportunity to display love and honor to the Lord Jesus. Then there is Judas. He seizes the opportunity to gain some cold cash as a treacherous opportunist.

The stage is now set. Judas waits and watches for an opportunity to betray Jesus into the hands of His enemies. The covenant of betrayal is a pivotal event.

Implications and applications

1B. There are three implications that arise from the predicting, scheming, and proclaiming of the main characters in the narrative.

1) Predicting

What do we learn from this prediction? We learn the important truth that the death of Christ was part of the plan of God. It was a settled fact in God's plan. Thus, Jesus indicates by these words that He is resolute in commitment to the will of God. Doing the will of God is His food and drink; it is more vital to His life than food. He foretells the suffering that stands out in front of Him with unmistakable submission to the divine plan and covenant of redemption.

The words of Jesus teach us that there are no surprises in human events. The plan of God is unfolding. Jesus is the obedient Son who submits thoughtfully and willingly to the Father's plan and thus to the eternal covenant of redemption. God's control and Christ's obedience are comforting truths (a contrast to the covenant of betrayal; an example to help us submit).

2) Scheming

When Matthew goes on to discuss the plotting of the chief priests and elders (26.3-5), he does so in light of the plan of God and our Lord's submission to that plan. Peter does a similar thing looking back to the death of Christ in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost when he places divine foreordination back to back with human responsibility. In relation to the crucifixion, he says, **this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men** (Acts 2.23) and **what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled** (Acts 3.18).

The plotting of the leaders and Judas does not side track the plan of God. Unwittingly, they serve the purposes of God. They do their evil deeds thoughtfully and willingly, but God controls every step they take. They are responsible, foolish, and their opposition to the Lord Jesus is futile. What a testimony it is to the folly of sin, of rebellion, envy, autonomy, hatred, murder, and greed. These things are foolish wherever they may occur in our fallen world. They are especially foolish in relation to Jesus Christ as He accomplishes His saving work on earth. God causes the plans of men to fail; His purposes stand forever sure (Ps. 33.10-11, ¹⁰ **The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.** ¹¹ **The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations**).

3) Proclaiming

By anointing Christ, this woman far exceeded all the piety of greatest men in Israel. This lowly disciple proclaimed the truth in a richer way than all the teachers of the law did. She proclaimed the truth in a truly truthful way. Jesus tells us that she poured the oil on His body to prepare Him for burial. She did so while He was alive. The act therefore had symbolic significance; it was a worship-filled act of confession. She had intuitive insight into His coming death. Thus, she proclaimed the *crucifixion as a fragrant sacrifice* well pleasing to God. That gospel goes out to the ends of the earth throughout the time between His comings. Mary's act of worship proclaims the gospel-good-news that the crucifixion, confirmed by burial, is not a tragedy. Instead, it is an accomplishment. It is a sweet smelling aroma, which rises up to heaven acceptable to God. It is *an anticipation of the sweetness in store for sinners* who find acceptance with God by the Savior's sacrifice of His very body.

2B. Applications

Two applications interrelate: you should consider that honoring Christ is higher than any other value, and giving is a valuable way of honoring Christ.

1) You should consider that honoring Christ is something higher in value than any other value.

Granted, Jesus is not physically present today and you cannot literally pour oil on His head. How then can you apply this account to your life?

You have part of your answer regarding how to do so in the topical placement of the account here by Matthew.

Matthew's placement of the narrative makes it transitional between the Olivet Discourse and the betrayal by Judas (note how the anointing is "sandwiched" between the plotting of the chief priests, 26.3-5, and their glad reception of Judas, 26.14). My point is this: this placement makes us look back to the end of the Olivet Discourse that still rings in our ears. Once you look back, consider how to answer this question: how can you treat Christ with the love and honor that Mary gave Him? Of course, the answer is clear: if you show love and honor to the least of His brothers and sisters, you show love and honor to Him.

The idea seems to be that as we now move forward in the narrative to the suffering and death of Christ for His brothers and sisters, for you, and for me, we are to fix it firmly in our minds that He came to give His life to form a household of faith. He came to build the church, which is His family with one Father in heaven and with Christ as the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. This is the fruit of His covenantal/predestinating love (Rom. 8.29).

It should strike us sharply and wake us up to think that the only thing that Jesus puts on the docket for the Day of Judgment at His return and before His glorious throne is how you and I treat His brothers and sisters. That is a remarkable ending to the Olivet Discourse. It shows that prophecy is extremely relevant, and its relevance pertains most acutely to the practical faithfulness of our love for one another in the Christian family.

Specifically, you may ask, "How can I do this today, given that Jesus is not with us physically?" You do this today by doing similar things for His brothers and sisters. By showing hospitality, by honoring, and by doing good, especially to the household of faith, you properly prioritize the things of your life. Jesus receives such self-sacrifice as a well-pleasing fragrance. He commends how you love and honor one another as something beautiful that you do for Him.

2) Giving is a literal and valuable way of honoring Christ

How can you put Mary's generosity into perspective? Should you rivet it in place in the history of redemption as unique to Mary? Is there something here for you too?

At least we can say this much: you worship, love, and honor Christ when you give to Him by giving to His church. It pleases Him if you not only do the light things of the law, such as tithing (Mat. 23.23), but also if you give in a generous way, not grudgingly, from the heart, and cheerfully. The Lord loves a cheerful giver.

Mary's giving to the Lord Jesus is a fragrant symbol showing that His death is a sacrifice sweet smelling to the Father. Pleasant aromas went along with the offering of sacrifices. You offer sacrifices now in your giving. It represents thankfulness because Christ paid the price of your sin debt. Therefore, *giving to gospel ministry is a NT form of offering sacrifice* as Paul states in Philippians: **I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (4.18).**

This prelude to crucifixion should encourage you in your giving; it is the driving force of cheerful giving. Giving intertwines with the gospel. It is an act of worship. It acknowledges that His sacrifice is an aroma that pleases the Father. When you give, you should be thinking that your money goes directly to the Lord Jesus that He receives as a direct gift to Him, as an aroma that pleases Him. You should be thinking that it is a small sacrifice on your part for Him. By giving to the gospel, you confess the greatness of His sacrifice. The cross is a sweet smelling fragrance that drives cheerful and fragrant giving to the Lord Jesus as an act of love to Him.

To the risen Lord Jesus be all glory both now and forevermore