
The Unfolding Plot

Matthew 26:1-16

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There have been some great betrayals in history. Some have been national where someone betrays their country. Some are personal and relational where someone betrays a friend. Both are terrible. Both are crimes against trust.

This section of Matthew opens and closes with plotting:

The beginning of the plotting is in Matthew 26:3-5

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."

The High Priest initiates the plot.

The center is in Matthew 26:14-16.

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.

A disciple knows of and offers to engage in the plot.

The opposite bookend is in Matthew 27:1-2

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ² And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

A full-scale plot to destroy Jesus is developed.

In between, Matthew moves us through four scenes that take us ever closer to the cross.

The section opens in Bethany, with Jesus at Simon the leper's home (v.1-16)

The scene changes to the upper room, and Jesus is with His disciples (v.17-35)

The story then moves to Gethsemane, and Jesus is with the inner three disciples (v.36-46)

Final scene also takes place in Gethsemane, with Judas handing over Jesus to the authorities (v.47-56)

Each scene is so rich that we will linger over them over the next weeks. As we do so, we will see how each one anticipates and approaches the cross. Things are coming to a head. The rising conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious establishment will culminate in the call for the Lord's execution.

The Ominous Setting (v.1-5)

What is about to take place will come as no surprise.

With a Prediction (v.1-2)

The time of teaching has come to an end. Jesus turns once again to His disciples to predict what is about to happen.

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.”

Jesus has finished His teaching. Matthew is closing the last of the five teaching sections of his book. Matthew has clearly been showing how Jesus is the new Moses, the new Lawgiver. Matthew has presented Jesus' teaching in five clearly marked discourses. Think in terms of five panels, five lectures. But why five? It seems that Matthew is paralleling the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. In addition, Deuteronomy has five discourses or sections in it as well. Whatever the parallels may be, and they seem to be intentional by Matthew, they are coming to a close.

We also note that Jesus is moving into this phase of life and ministry with a sense of purpose. There is a distinct transition taking place. This is not merely Matthew's writing, but is Jesus' intention, purpose, and action. Jesus is not being moved along by the flow of circumstances. He is moving along the trajectory of the Father's purpose and providences. In a sense, Jesus is causing these things to unfold.

Jesus is connecting His soon coming death and resurrection to an Old Testament context. What is about to happen is the fulfillment of the Passover feast. This is not just about timing, but is about fulfillment. The Passover event - in being redeemed from, that is, coming out of Egypt along with the sacrificial lamb and the blood that covers - are all going to be fulfilled through the events that will soon take place.

The last phrase of Jesus' prediction makes three important statements. It is the Son of Man, the King, the Messiah who is going to be crucified. This will happen because Jesus will be delivered up, will be handed over to be crucified. This is an act of the Father. God, His Father, had determined in eternity past to deliver up Jesus to wicked hands who would crucify Him and thus bring about the redemption of God's people. But He will also be delivered up by men, by people. He will be delivered up by the High Priest, the elders and chief priests, Pilate, the Romans and by a disciple. All of them act together to deliver Jesus up to die.

Jesus predicts the means of His death. He is going to be executed as a criminal. He will be executed in one of the most horrible means of inflicting capital punishment ever devised. At the Passover season, by being delivered up, Jesus will go to the cross. Please understand what I am going to say. The cross was a vicious, brutal, bloody, horrific way to die. We don't like to think about it. We love what the cross did for us. We often avoid the reality of its savageness. I believe the reason the cross was chosen was so that we would have a very dim glimpse into the spiritual suffering Jesus endured for us.

By a Plot (v.3-5)

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

The *delivered up* begins with the plotting by the religious leadership of Israel. They gather at the palace of Caiaphas, who was the High Priest. Caiaphas was a political appointment and as usurper to the Levitical priesthood. He was cunning, cruel, and carnal. He had attained power under the Romans and had amassed great riches. This palace was his house. They were meeting away from the Temple, at his personal residence.

One writer observed, "Their plan is to have Jesus arrested quietly and secretly ("by stealth," v. 4) and do so after the Passover week ("not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people," v. 5). They're sneaky. They're smart. Jerusalem's history is filled with uprisings when messianic figures came along, especially during the Passover, when the city was mobbed with millions of pilgrims. Whose will, will win? we wonder. Will Jesus be killed during Passover, as he said? Or will Jesus be killed after the Passover, as they planned? The temple aristocracy is pitted against the incarnate Creator. Let's see whose Passover plot prevails." [O'Donnell, p.763]

You do have to ask, "How do they think they are going to carry this off?" Jesus is a popular figure. He is well known. He has loyal followers. But they will try to and do arrest Jesus in secret. But their plot to murder Him privately, secretly, will fail. Now think about what you are reading... This is the religious leadership of Israel. This is not some small group forming a murder plot who have no significance in the life and culture of the day. This is the High Priest and the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Judaism. It is shocking.

Proverbs tells us that man plans but God disposes. For all their plotting, God's purpose and plan will prevail. Evil may appear to win. But even the evil act of crucifying Jesus will run exactly and precisely on God's timetable.

The Memorial Gift (v.6-13)

Jesus is moving toward the cross. His crucifixion is just a few days away. But He is still among His disciples and friends. A great, sacrificial gift is to be shared.

In a Costly Dedication (v.6-7)

⁶Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷a 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.

Bethany is a place Jesus often came to. He had great friends there. But this is particularly notable because of the house He came to. He was visiting in the home of a man named Simon. That is not so significant. This was not Simon Peter, the disciple, but Simon, the leper. Jesus is reclining at dinner in the house of someone who would have been an outcast. Simon had been a leper. In Bethany, he was so well-known that this had become a common designation.

But it would have been a place to avoid. It would have been thought of as contaminated and corrupted. No one would go there. But Jesus had. And Jesus did. The disease of leprosy was particularly marked out in the Old Testament as contagious and contaminating. It was a graphic picture of the corruption and contagion of sin.

Yet Jesus often touched to heal the leprous. Since the disciples are in the house and at the meal with Jesus, the Lord must have healed Simon in the past. Now, they are reclining at a meal. This former leper is sharing his life and his home with the Savior.

This is what the cross is about. It is about the forgiveness of sin that opens the door to fellowship. Simon, is no more the diseased man. He has been healed. Forgiveness always precedes fellowship. God's forgiveness calls us into fellowship with Him and with one another.

But something dramatic happens. A woman enters the room with an alabaster jar in her hand. The jar is a beautiful translucent white. She comes up to Jesus and pours a very expensive perfume over his head. Matthew leaves out some details that other gospels share. He does not give her name or her relationship to Jesus. He does not even seem to give all the details of what she did. In a very simple sentence, Matthew focused on an act, the pouring of perfumed oil on Jesus' head.

What is this meant to invoke?

Certainly, it points us to the anointing of oil on King David. Matthew has filled his book with Davidic and kingly references. Here is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the kingship promised to David. He is being anointed with oil, not as Ruler, but as our Redeemer.

Furthermore, Matthew intends for us to remember a Psalm, that is Psalm 133. There, David celebrates the sweetness of joy in the anointing of Aaron as priest. Like dew on Mount Harmon and the oil that ran down into Aaron's beard and on to his garments is the sweetness when brothers remain together in harmony and unity.

Why? Because of what follows...

With an Indignant Denunciation (v.8–9)

⁸And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste?" ⁹For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor."

The disciples watch this lavish display of sacrifice and are... indignant. They are outraged. How can that be? Why are they not seeing the love, the care, the desire to honor? How does one observe the outpouring of an expensive sacrifice in love for Jesus and respond with indignation?

All they can see is waste. They are aghast at the excess of something so precious, so valuable. But what is really sad is that they do not see or sense the value of the One on whom this lavish sacrifice is being poured. They see with their eyes but are blind with their hearts. Pause and reflect on their question, "Why this waste?" Do you see the poverty of their souls even as they cannot see the richness of her sacrifice?

The disciples criticize her for not selling the perfume and giving the proceeds to the poor. How often this is the way of a small soul, a poverty stricken heart. How often is sacrifice for Jesus critiqued this way. Why was it not sold for money and that given to the poor? No, that is not even the way they speak. It isn't a question. It is an assertion. "It could have been..."

Is giving to the poor and needy a good thing? Yes, if done in a Biblical way to those eligible to receive it. Are the disciples really concerned for the poor? Maybe, though Jesus' sarcastic response may point away from that? Is there more going on here than Matthew records? Yes, we know that from other gospels. But Matthew wants us to focus on what he says, not on what he doesn't say. This complaint, this indignation, is not merely on the part of one. It is corporate.

Matthew is writing this for the eyes and ears of the church. This is a rebuke for us. This is the kind of thinking that negates the cross. This is the kind of thinking that will not pour out one's life and treasure for Jesus. This is the kind of thinking that shifts focus from what is being done to what

could be done that we would never do. This is the kind of thinking that pursues our ease and comforts and focuses on anything but the cross and kingdom. This is the kind of thinking that does not value Jesus enough. This is the kind of thinking that redefines the meaning, ministry and message of the church. Let's make it about the poor. Giving away money is ever so much easier than pouring out ourselves. Let's make discipleship about everything and anything except taking up the cross, being willing to sacrifice.

By a Scathing Defense (v.10–13)

Jesus steps in. Imagine the scene. The woman has just poured out this expensive perfume. Jesus' hair and beard glisten with it. The perfume fills the room. The woman can sense, if not actually hear, the displeasure, the indignation of the disciples. Into this atmosphere, the words of Jesus' defense cut like a sword.

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."

An Expectation of the Cross (v.10–12)

This lady offered this extraordinary sacrifice because she believed what Jesus had said. She is expecting the cross. Her selfless act of love was to prepare The Lord's body for burial. She had heard what Jesus said. She believed it. She brought a sacrifice as an act of faith. She sacrificed her treasure because Jesus would sacrifice Himself. This is the terrible beauty of the cross. This is the glorious beauty of our own outpoured lives.

A Rebuke by the Cross (v.11)

"You always have the poor..." What is Jesus saying? Many have lifted this out of its context and made it into a positive affirmation, a political statement, or a church mission. It is none of these things. It is a rebuke of the disciples.

They have failed to believe what Jesus has said about the cross. It is coming. It is sure. They just don't seem to accept its reality.

They are making an excuse. Why bring this up about the poor? It is manipulative, what we call, "shaming". They are embarrassing the lady. And they intended to.

They have valued the absent poor more than the present Jesus. Let's see if when Jesus is absent, they will somehow help the poor who are present.

Why do I say all this? The text opens with a prediction of the cross. And now Jesus says and Matthew writes about "the gospel".

A Celebration of the Cross (v.13)

Her act will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached! And here we are, today, remembering her act. What an amazing affirmation. The story of her simple act of loving sacrifice will go everywhere the gospel goes. And so it has.

This very act and Jesus' defense of it sets off one of the disciples.

The Stunning Deal (v.14-16)

One of the disciples has had enough. This appears to be the final straw...

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.

His Identity (v.14)

Matthew is very careful to identify the betrayer. There would be no mistake as to who it was. He is identified now because he will move in and out through the rest of the story. His name has gone down in infamy. He was one of the twelve. He was chosen by Jesus to be a disciple knowing full well that he would betray Jesus and leave the 12th Apostle slot open for Paul who would come later. His full name is given. Judas Iscariot.

His Inquiry (v.15)

Somehow Judas knows about the plotting by the religious leaders. We are not told how he knew, but he went to them. He offers to be the inside man. He will tell them what Jesus' plans. But he wants a fee. He has his price. They agree on 30 pieces of silver. Judas trades his Master for the price that would be paid for an injured slave (Exodus 21:32). This is an allusion to Zechariah 11:12, "Then I said to them, "If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver."

The deal is struck. Judas is paid up front.

His Iniquity (v.16)

Judas actively seeks a time, an opportunity in which he can report to the plotters. They want a time to arrest him secretly. Judas is seeking to give it to them.

Reflect and Respond

Praise God for the unerring and unswerving movement of His grace. From eternity past down to this moment in Simon the leper's home, God's plan for the salvation of His people unfolds.

Thank God for the cross. All praise to Jesus who went through the terrible pain for people like us. Jesus was clear about His purpose. He followed the path of the Father's will. He has redeemed us.

What does sacrifice mean to you? What will being a disciple mean to you? Do you really love Jesus? How can you tell? Not by how you feel, that is for certain. Want to know how much Christ loves you? Look at His sacrifice. What know how much you love Him? Look at your sacrifice for Him.