

A Beautiful Sacrifice and a Stealthy Betrayal

Matt. 26:1-16

Intro. In the world of entertainment, people who are polar opposites are often paired up with humorous results. Going way back, some may remember the Smothers brothers, the Odd Couple, Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon. More recently, I think some of the success *Fixer Upper* enjoys is owed to the playful differences between Chip and Joanna Gaines. So people and situations are often presented in contrast for purposes of humor and entertainment.

It may surprise you to learn that the Holy Spirit sometimes uses contrast...not for entertainment...but for edification. For example, God who is entirely just, is not at all like the unjust judge in the parable where the woman has to threaten him to get justice. And God the Father is not like the father who gives His son a stone when he asks for bread or a serpent when he asks for an egg. These contrasts and others are given for emphasis and instruction.

This morning we come to the final section of Matthew's Gospel that culminates in the Passion of Christ...His crucifixion, burial and triumphant resurrection. As the title suggests, the text before us sets certain behaviors and events in stark and total contrast. On one hand we're shown the determination of Jesus to fulfill His Father's will and complete the mission that was His to perform. On the other hand we're shown the religious leaders gathered to oppose God and eliminate the Messiah He provided. The contrasts continue as we're shown how a woman's deep faith prompted a beautiful act of sacrifice and devotion. Yet this act of love is set against the unbelief of Judas and the most despicable act of betrayal the world has ever witnessed.

Woven through this passage we're also shown the irresistible power of God's sovereign purposes in contrast with the weakness of human aspiration. It's a passage that fills us with wonder one moment and then causes us to recoil in disappointment the next. Consistent with His purpose for writing and by the inspiration of God's Spirit, Matthew arranged this anthology of events to prove that Jesus Christ is in fact the Messiah of Israel and the One who is worthy of our praise.

1. Passover's prophetic fulfillment – vs. 1, 2 - When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, the Passover is two days away--and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

v. 1 marks the end of the Olivet Discourse and the beginning of the final section in Matthew's Gospel. The teaching ministry of Jesus is now finished. Some say the previous 25 chapters are merely the prologue to the closing three chapters which center on the cross. MacArthur writes, "*The cross is the culmination of the Gospel and the culmination of redemptive history, the only eternal hope of fallen mankind.*" The cross of Jesus is the absolute focal point of God's plan to redeem fallen humanity. The meaning of the cross was foreshadowed in the acceptable sacrifice of Abel / in the ark that saved Noah and his family / in the substitute ram provided to Abraham on Mt. Moriah / in the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery / in the sacrificial system and temple worship of the OT / in serpent lifted up in the wilderness / and through countless other Old Testament persons and events. In **Jn. 5:29** Jesus told Israel's leaders, "**You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.**" There is no greater loss or tragedy than missing the Savior and the salvation accomplished by His cross.

Like so many today, the Corinthians were obsessed with philosophies and wisdom. Their ears itched to hear clever arguments and shiny ideas. After Paul's eyes were opened to the incomparable wonder of Christ and the cross, he refused to dawdle in the shifting sands of human philosophies and opinions. Though an intellectual himself, he wrote,

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. - I Cor. 2:2 To the believers in Galatia, he wrote, **May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. – Gal. 6:14**

So, having answered His disciple's question about the sign of His second coming and the end of the age, Jesus abruptly brought His disciples back to the reason He had come. For the 4th and final time, He spoke of His coming crucifixion. Now, there's something important to note in **v. 2**. The crucifixion of Jesus was no accident or unfortunate miscalculation. Peter emphasized this in **Acts 2:23** when he said, **This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.** Because every aspect of the Passion was planned and orchestrated by God, here in **v. 2** Jesus said, **"the Passover is two days away--and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."**

It was probably Wednesday evening when Jesus said this. He told His disciples His crucifixion would coincide with **Passover** which was just **two days away**. In fact, His crucifixion would be the prophetic fulfillment of all that **Passover** prefigured and pointed to. In other words, as John the Baptist said, Jesus is **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world....**the ultimate and final Lamb.

The Jewish Passover or Feast of Unleavened Bread is an annual celebration that looks back to a night long ago when God spared the firstborn male in believing Hebrew families. Through Moses, the people were told that salvation was available to families who would sacrifice a lamb. As a token of their faith and obedience they were to paint the lamb's blood on the door posts and lintels of their houses. When the death angel saw the blood he would pass by that house. Now centuries had passed and many Passovers celebrations had been observed. Millions of lambs had been slain. Even now as Jesus spoke, Israel's priests were examining the lambs to see if they met the law's criteria of a lamb fit for sacrifice. Yet unknown to most in Israel, the final and ultimate Lamb of God was in their midst. The timing of the Christ's crucifixion was entirely a matter of divine control. According to God's plan, the death of Jesus would coincide with the Passover that prefigured His sacrifice.

So, none of these events or their timing was accidental or helter-skelter. The conspiracy of the Jewish leaders / the betrayal by Judas / the arrest / the mock trials / and ultimately, the cross itself, were details planned in the eternal counsels of heaven before time began. 28x's in the Book of Revelation Jesus is referred to as **the Lamb!** Among these many occasions **Rev.13:8** adds, **All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.** Again at the close of the Bible, Christ and His cross are the focal point of God's plan to redeem and reclaim fallen humanity because Jesus, the Lamb of God, **was slain from the creation of the world!**

So in **v. 2** Jesus explained **WHEN** He would die. But he also explained again **HOW** He would die. He would be put to death, not by the Jewish way of stoning or by some other means, but by the gruesome Roman way...by crucifixion. Now remember, we said this section contains a series of contrasts. The first clash highlights God's irresistible sovereignty in contrast with the weakness of human aspiration. This clash becomes apparent when **v. 2** is compared with **v. 4**.

2. Plotting to arrest and kill Jesus – vs. 3-5 - Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."

If **v. 2** presents the Passion from the divine side (**WHEN** and **HOW** God planned to exalt Jesus) **vs. 3, 4** presents the Passion from the human side (**WHEN** and **HOW** men plotted to eliminate Jesus).

One blessing of being God's child is that our Father invites us to exchange our perhaps and maybe proposals for His rock-solid plans. And His plans for us are always loving, wise and good. **Jer. 29:11 - For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.** That's what Jesus did each step of the way. He submitted to His Father's plan. Even when He knew that suffering was immediately ahead. Jesus prayed, "**not my will, but yours be done.**"

At that time **Joseph Caiaphas** served as Israel's High Priest. By Jewish Law, qualifying for this high office was normally a matter of heritage. But times had changed and priests were now appointed by the Roman government. This would be something like a Federal Government that demanded to appoint our next pastor. In Jesus' time at the will of the Romans, the priesthood swung like a revolving door. Because Caiaphas was politically shrewd, his stay was longer than most. He had learned to dance to please the Romans. He served from AD 18 to 36. The priest who followed him never had a chance to be evaluated by his first 100 days in office. He didn't make it to day 50! Now Caiaphas was married to the daughter of Annas, his predecessor. He actually shared the office with his father in law before Annas was sent packing by the Roman authorities. Annas and Caiaphas were like the god-fathers of the Jewish mafia. The tables Jesus overturned in the Temple were their operation. These priests were poster boys for the godless religious system that dominated Israel. To Caiaphas, Jesus was a threat who had to be eliminated.

This secret gathering of those opposed to Jesus happened at the palace of Caiaphas. By the way, here's another contrast. The reigning priest has a palace while the King of kings had no place to lay His head. Now remember, though Jesus hadn't been arrested or arraigned, His prosecutors had already determined His sentence. **v. 4** says **they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him.** Notice carefully, the last thing these religious men wanted was a public arrest and execution! They didn't want to create a scene or incite a revolt among His Galilean followers. They preferred a simple stoning. They wanted Jesus to just go away quietly, like mafia infidels who just seem to disappear. But there was a problem with their plan. The Jews were under Roman control. Among the liberties taken from them was the authority to execute capital punishment. In the end, what they hoped would be a covert operation failed because crucifixion was anything but private.

But wait...on four occasions, Jesus told His disciples precisely **HOW** He would die. He said He would be crucified...not pushed over a cliff as the people of Nazareth tried to do / not stoned as the Jews wanted to do on several occasions. His fate wasn't at the mercy of wicked men and human beings were **never** the ones to write His story! According to the plan and purposes of God, the curse pronounced on fallen humanity would be transferred to Jesus and He would publically bear the full burden of that curse. The emblem of the curse was the crown of thorns pressed into His scalp. **Deut. 21:22, 23** says, **If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.** Later Peter understood the meaning of the cross and wrote, **He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet. 2:24)**

So wicked men plotted and schemed. But their aspirations couldn't affect or alter what God had already determined. Israel's leaders wanted Jesus eliminated quietly and secretly. Instead, Jesus was put to death in the most public way possible. He was hung on a cross at Golgotha beside a busy thoroughfare in full view of bumper to bumper Passover traffic. If you visit the Holy Land today, you'll see tour bus parking at the foot of this rocky bluff where Jesus died for us! But in **v. 5** we find another collision between the sovereign plan of God and the plot to eliminate Jesus. **"But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."** First Matthew shows **HOW** Jesus was eliminated was trumped by God's plan.

But notice, the time **WHEN** the leaders plotted for this to happen was also frustrated. The Jews said, **not during the Feast...** Their plot to eliminate Jesus had to be postponed until after the entire Passover period that lasted almost two weeks. Why?...because as they said, **there may be a riot among the people.** Leaders like **Annas** were seldom deposed for corruption. Instead, they were deposed because they failed to keep peace among the Judean population. **Caiaphas** realized what was at stake for him politically. He refused to allow anything that might put his position in jeopardy. His priority and main ambition was to hold on to His office. (Where have we heard this before?)

Josephus, the 2nd century Jewish historian wrote that as many as 2¾ million people had come to Jerusalem for this primary feast. Within the city walls it was like "standing room only." Many in this enormous crowd had come from Galilee where Jesus did most of His teaching and performed most of His miracles. Many in this Galilean crowd were favorable to Jesus. They were the ones who formed the spontaneous Palm Sunday parade. They spread their garments on the road. The religious leaders were outraged when they shouted, "**Hosanna!**" "**Blessed is the King of Israel!**"

But wait again...in v. 2 Jesus said, "**As you know, the Passover is two days away--and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.**" The **HOW** and **WHEN** of Christ's death had been previously determined in the counsels of Heaven. Like the tables Jesus overturned in the Temple, the plot conceived by these wicked men was completely overturned by the rule of God. **Prov. 21:30** says, **There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD.** No two plans for Jesus could have been farther apart. But at the end of the day, the plan and purposes of God prevailed...as they always have and always will. This is the tension Matthew sets up right at the beginning of events leading up to the cross. It's a tension the Spirit of God wants us to sense and feel. He wants His readers to pay attention to *whose plans are fulfilled* and *whose are not*. If Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus is to die as He said and as ancient prophecies require, the plans and efforts of the most powerful Jewish leaders in Jerusalem must be overcome. And they were.

The take away for us is much like the challenge Joshua gave his generation. In **Josh. 24:15** he said, **But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.** I love this passage. It's as though Joshua says, "*Listen Israel. The choice isn't that complicated. Today you're living in land the Lord gave you...land the gods of the Amorites were powerless to protect. So make your choice.*" In the same spirit, Matthew urges his readers to choose Jesus Christ who controls everything as King of kings and Lord of lords. His plans for all who trust Him are guaranteed to succeed against all odds. This includes the purposes Jesus laid out in **chaps. 24, 25.** They will unfold precisely as He said. So, believe His Word. Trust Him. His promises cannot fail!

In fleshing out this principle, we next find a contrast between two individuals. Because there's no sexism with God, one individual is male and the other is female. The ladies should be delighted to learn that the female is the hero while the male is a zero. What? But ladies first...

3. Preparation for the death and burial of Jesus – vs. 6-13 While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Here Matthew interrupts the chronological sequence of events to insert a story that happened four days earlier. We call it a flashback. He does this to support the purposes of his Gospel. To see this story in the sequence of events leading up to the cross and to gain some additional details, we need to read the account given in John's Gospel. If you'd like to read along please find **Jn. 12:1-8 - Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. "He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."**

This dinner took place at the home Simon whom Jesus had cured of the incurable disease of leprosy. Here's another contrast. Jesus cured Simon of a disease that was humanly incurable! As a testimony to Christ's healing power, Simon is known as **Simon the Leper**. John names the woman who remains unnamed in Matthew. She is Mary of Bethany...sister to Martha and Lazarus whom Jesus recently raised from the dead. John establishes the value of the spikenard Mary poured on Jesus as worth a **year's wages** or approximately 300 denarii. He tells us the fragrance of the perfume filled the house. He also says it was **Judas Iscariot** who objected and saw this act of loving devotion as a complete waste. Matthew says the disciples were **indignant**. They seem to have been influenced by Judas. That doesn't excuse them even a little, but it serves to remind us that we need to be careful whose lead we follow. And notice the highly charged emotional appeal Judas resorted to. He said, **"This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor."** Who could argue with reasoning like this? Who is so cold hearted to admit they don't care about the needs of the less fortunate? In an editorial way, John added what he knew to be true. He said, **He (Judas) did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.** That's a smack down on a false and manipulative argument, isn't it?

It didn't matter whether Jesus heard what they were saying or not. He knows our thoughts even before words are formed. **vs. 10-12 say, Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.** Here we again sense the tension of contrast. The disciples saw what Mary did as a waste of good resources. Jesus called her act **a beautiful thing**. In fact, in **v.13** He said, **"I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."** Some may say, Hey listen, I need some proof this actually came to pass. But no one here can say that...right? No one here this morning. Because, duh...who are we talking about? We're talking about Mary and the extravagant thing she did 2,000 yrs. ago!

But notice how Jesus effectively cleared away the emotional fog laid down by Judas. He said, **The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have Me.** Jesus wasn't insensitive or indifferent toward the poor. We know that! On several occasions He refused even to let mealtime slip by without feeding the hungry crowd who gathered to hear Him. Jesus simply stated a fact of life. There will always be poor people and 300 denarii could never solve world poverty. But in this unique moment, this act of worship was entirely proper. In fact, in heaven's sight, Mary couldn't have used her resource for a purpose any greater than this.

Not only did the ointment poured on Jesus' head flow down his garments, but John tells us **she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair**. Picture what she did. Was significant material sacrifice involved? Yes. This **spikenard** was probably a family treasure but she emptied the bottle without giving a second thought to its value. Her giving was pure and motivated by the love and grace she had herself experienced. To Mary, there was nothing wasteful about it. She probably felt this valuable perfume had found its most noble purpose. In the act of wiping His feet with her hair we see the behavior of a humble servant toward a king. Do a study for yourself sometime and see how often the NT has Mary kneeling before Jesus. Mary was a learner and a worshipper.

On one occasion Martha was scurrying around working, working...and Jesus said to her... **"Mary (who worshipped at His feet) has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."** You see Mary recognized and believed who Jesus is. And despite the knuckleheaded, slow to believe disciples around her, she took Jesus at His Word. She believed He was about to be crucified and buried just as He said. So as an act of faith, she anointed His body for burial. She probably felt this was her last opportunity to do something meaningful for her savior and king. For all time, Mary is a super hero. But her story is set in stark contrast with Judas, a miserable zero. People give their children all sorts of interesting names. But nobody names their child Nero, Hitler, or Judas. I've never known even one. Judas Iscariot, or Judas of Kerioth, is a name history would rather forget. But despite his treachery, Judas played a significant role in the Passion of Christ. He provided the Jewish leaders with the MO they sought...a sly and covert way to arrest and kill Jesus. And what could be a better than a betrayer who was a disciple...an insider...someone close to Jesus.

4. Purchasing a betrayer and pursuing an opportunity – vs. 14-16 - Then one of the Twelve--the one called Judas Iscariot--went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

We'll postpone a detailed study of Judas until we come to a later passage. What motivated him is a complex question with more than one answer. Let me suggest three. The first answer has to do with the sovereign plan of God / the second has to do with the character of Judas / and third has to do with the Adversary of God and man...the devil.

- The first answer involves divine providence. In **Lk. 22:22** Jesus said, **"The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him."** In a Messianic Psalm written hundreds of years before Jesus came, the Psalmist wrote, **Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me. – Psalms 41:9** The role of God's sovereignty in the actions of Judas raises more questions than answers. But this much we know, even his betrayal was part of God's plan.
- The second answer is found in the character of Judas himself. In **Jn 13** Jesus washed the disciple's feet. In **vs.10, 11** He said **"A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."** For he **knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.** The bath Jesus spoke of here refers to salvation and the washing of regeneration. The one disciple whose life had not been cleansed by Jesus was Judas. Given the same opportunity as others, his heart remained cold and indifferent. With no love for Jesus, the actions of Judas exposed the greed and emptiness of his heart. Mary gave her best but Judas asked, **what are you willing to give me?** Mary had become a giver like her Lord...Judas remained a taker!
- Yet there's one final piece to the answer and it's Satanic. **Jn. 13:1, 2** says, - **It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.**

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Because Judas hardened his heart toward God and His salvation, he remained a servant of sin. He remained vulnerable to Satanic influence. The KJV says, the devil put this betrayal into his heart. Satan sensed the void and filled that emptiness. Without a shred of mercy, Satan smiled as Judas hung himself.

As I wrap this up I want you to consider something. There's a little Mary and a little Judas in each one of us. I don't want to contribute to gender confusion but just forget the gender issue for a moment. I'm thinking about the character of Mary and the character of Judas. It doesn't matter if we've been a Christian for many years, as long as we are in this fallen flesh, we are conflicted. With respect to our behavior as Christians, one moment we're a hero...the next we're a zero. One moment we're willing to give Jesus everything, the next, we lust for something more than He has given us. **Gal. 5:17** explains the inconsistency this way...**the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.** This explains why Christians are often walking contradictions. We vacillate between being selfish and selfless...between being a giver and a taker. In complete and transparent honesty Patrick Morely writes, *"Our virtuous motives give way to the fantasies of the flesh. Our good intentions dissolve in a sea of self-centeredness. Our most noble thoughts occupy the space immediately adjacent to our most perverted ones. Our most admirable ambitions suffocate under the avalanche of the urgent. The juggernaut of the daily press squeezes truth into a once a week compartment."* Tell me it isn't so!

The solution to this conflict is found in **Gal. 5:16 - So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.** As a man who was unsaved and without God's Spirit, Judas committed the worst crime in history. He betrayed the Son of God for 30 pieces of silver. And there, but for the grace of God, is you or me. But Mary chose a different path. She trusted Jesus and became His follower. She surrendered her life to this sovereign One whose loving plans always succeed. The Spirit of God filled her life as she believed and stayed closely connected to Jesus. This is the spiritual secret that secures victory in the conflict and enables us to live and serve more consistently. Mary remained close to Jesus. Paul expresses the winning formula this way... **live by means of God's Spirit.** Allow the Lord to fill your life each day and throughout the day. Let nothing interfere or replace your need to spend time in the presence of Jesus Christ. Live your life in step with the One whose plans and purposes never fail and be blessed! **I John 5:4 - This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.**