

## Chapter 102: Preparing for Jesus' Burial

*Matthew 26:1–13*

In Matthew 26, we come to the final major section of the Gospel. Everything we have read about the life of Jesus up to this point has prepared us for this moment as Jesus embarks on the final leg of his journey toward the cross. Although Jesus has been preparing his disciples for this moment throughout his time with them, they are still not ready for what will happen to Jesus. Indeed, everyone in Matthew 26:1–13 must prepare for the death of Jesus, but they will do so well or poorly. This story, then, presses upon us the importance of making our own preparations: *prepare your life around the crucifixion of Jesus.*

### Resolute Purpose (Matt. 26:1–2)

In v.1, Matthew signals a transition into a new section of his Gospel by the word ἐγένετο (*egeneto*), sometimes translated “And it came to pass” (KJV), but omitted from translations like the ESV as redundant. While it is true that the word does not add any meaning to the sentence, the omission of the word hides an important structural marker that Matthew uses to organize the completion of the discourses of Jesus (Matt. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1). In the immediate context, this would signal an end to Jesus’ Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24–25). Beyond that, however, Matthew here states that it came to pass that Jesus had finished *all* these sayings, which Lenski interprets as implying “imply that no further ‘words’ or discourses such as these would be reported in the remainder of his Gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

As such, Matthew shows us that Jesus is shifting out of his teaching ministry and into his sacrificial ministry as he prepares to go to the cross. Accordingly, Jesus tells his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified” (v. 2). As we will see shortly, the political calculations of the religious leaders will lead them to seek to avoid killing Jesus during the Passover (v. 5). Nevertheless, Jesus here states that this will be the precise time at which he will be handed over to be crucified. On this clash of intentions, Hagner writes, “Pervading the narrative is a deep sense of irony. Though sinful men do their best to thwart the mission of Jesus, they accomplish the very purpose for which he came and thus fulfill God’s will.”<sup>2</sup>

### Vain Plotting (Matt. 26:3–5)

The transitional conjunction “then” in v. 3 may suggest that the religious leaders were gathered to plot against Jesus “perhaps at the very same hour and moment” that Jesus was speaking to his own

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1002.

<sup>2</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 750.

disciples.<sup>3</sup> Included in this meeting are the chief priests and the elders (i.e., the Sanhedrin); however, as Morris notes, neither the Pharisees nor the scribes are included: “in the passion narrative Jesus is most strongly opposed by the aristocratic Jewish establishment, people who were interested in political realities and in fitting in with the Roman overlords.”<sup>4</sup> All the various religious leaders have their own reasons for hating Jesus, but the Sanhedrin alone had the political power to bring about his crucifixion.

The language that these people “gathered” together, and that they “plotted” against Jesus alludes to the language of Psalm 31:13: “For I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!—as they *scheme together* against me, as *they plot* to take my life.”<sup>5</sup> By this allusion, Matthew intends for us to feel both the anguish of the one who is abandoned, forgotten, and conspired against (Ps. 31:11–13), but also the quiet confidence of faith which declares, “But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hand...” (Psalm. 31:14–15a).

Indeed, the *times* of Jesus are directly in view, as the religious leaders plot primarily *when* to kill Jesus: “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people” (v. 5). Whereas Jesus declared that he would die in two days, the religious leaders plan to defer their plans until after the feast. Lenski captures the effect of this well: “God rules even in the midst of his enemies. That Jesus should die, how, where, and just *when*, is entirely God’s decision and not at all the decision of Christ’s deadly foes.”<sup>6</sup> In this, then, we see that God is preventing Jesus’ enemies from doing anything at all that they wish. Instead, God is holding them back “by a secret restraint, from doing any thing by their deliberation or at their pleasure.”<sup>7</sup> Putting Jesus to death risked “an uproar,” which could possibly damage their standing with the Romans (see Acts 19:40).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, God had established the Passover for the very purpose of foreshadowing the death of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7).<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, it was the plans and purposes of God that prevailed, rather than the vain plotting of the people (Ps. 2:1).

We see in these two contrasted scenes a glimpse into the way God’s sovereignty interacts with the most heinous sins of human beings. Here, God is not instigating their sin; rather, he is guiding it—indeed, overruling their intentions within their sin—in order to bring about his gracious, saving purposes for his people. God is not the author or approver of sin, but he sets boundaries for sin, and he orders sin for his ultimate glory.

## Faithful Preparation (Matt. 26:6–13)

Whereas Jesus sets his face toward the imminence of his crucifixion, and whereas the religious leaders plot in vain to put him to death, the next scene brings still another perspective toward Jesus’

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<sup>3</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1003.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 644.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 588.

<sup>6</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1003.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:186.

<sup>8</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 754–55.

<sup>9</sup> “And therefore he determined that; his Son should be sacrificed on the very day of *the passover*, that the ancient figure might give place to the only sacrifice of eternal redemption.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:186.)

pending death. In v. 6, Jesus has moved on from his previous conversation with his disciples on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24:3) and has traveled to nearby Bethany, in the house of one named Simon the leper. Thus, Matthew moves us seamlessly from the palace of Caiaphas the high priest to the home of a leper! As starkly different as those two locations are, there is an even greater difference between the preparations made for the crucifixion of Jesus here than among the Sanhedrin. At this house, we read that “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” (v. 7). Again, whereas Caiaphas had been named, this woman is unnamed the Gospel of Matthew. As Blomberg points out, the word here for “ointment” “is, literally, *myrrh*; the reader may be meant to recall 2:11.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus’ life began with a gift of myrrh, and now it comes to an end with another gift of myrrh.

In response, the disciples became “indignant, saying, ‘Why this waste? [9] For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor’” (vv. 8–9). As we know from the parallel account in John 12:4–6, this indignation arose primarily from Judas, and it arose not out of any real concern for the poor, but out of Judas’s greed, since he regularly stole from the moneybag of Jesus, which had been entrusted to him. Matthew, however, expands the greed of Judas as the shared indignation of all the disciples. While they were not all stealing from the moneybag as Judas was, they apparently did feel that there was some impropriety with the lavish gift that the woman had given by pouring out the myrrh on Jesus. Yet, as Lenski notes, their indignation “condemns not only Mary but Jesus himself. Judas implies that Jesus is robbing the poor; that he is lavishing upon himself what rightfully belongs to charity; that for his own glorification he allows a waste that is utterly wrong; that his example is harmful to others; and that Judas is the man who knows what is right, proper, charitable, and is not afraid to mention it!”<sup>11</sup> How could Jesus’ own disciples (especially Judas) have impugned Jesus’ motives to this great degree?

At some level, it seems that Jesus’ disciples still have no real conception that their Master is about to die, in spite of his repeated warnings to that effect leading up to, and including, the words he uttered in v. 2. “Stagg wonders if Mary [the woman who anointed Jesus with oil; cf. John 12:3] and Judas were in fact Jesus’ first two followers really to believe that he was going to die but who then expressed their reactions in diametrically opposite ways.”<sup>12</sup> There is not only a contrast between the determination of Jesus to give himself up as a sacrifice and the determination of the religious leaders to make an end of Jesus. There is also a contrast between those two different kinds of determination about Jesus’ death and the denial of Jesus’ impending death by his disciples.

Therefore, Jesus rebukes his disciples for troubling the woman for the beautiful thing she has done for him, since they would always have the poor among them, but not always Jesus (vv. 10–11). Then, Jesus reminds them of what he has just told them by stating that, “In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial” (v. 12). It is unclear what this woman understood of Jesus’ mission, but she knew enough to take advantage of Jesus’ presence by pouring out the entirety of her most valuable possession before the opportunity slipped away forever. Because of her faith, Jesus insists that, “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” (v. 13).

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<sup>10</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 384.

<sup>11</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1008.

<sup>12</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 385, citing F. Stagg, “Matthew,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* vol. 8, ed. C. J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 231.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does the word that the KJV translates as, “when it came to pass,” mark a transition within the Gospel of Matthew (v. 1)? What does it mean that Jesus has “finished all these sayings” (v. 1)? How does Jesus’ prophecy of his own crucifixion in v. 2 connect with other predictions that Jesus has made about his impending crucifixion throughout this Gospel? Why do you think that the disciples are still not able to understand the significance of Jesus’ words?
2. What was the Sanhedrin, composed of the chief priests and elders that we read about in v. 3? What role did the Sanhedrin play in Jewish society? What role did the Sanhedrin play in their relationship with the Romans? Why do they want to kill Jesus? Why do they want to avoid killing Jesus during the Passover? How do their actions echo the language of Psalm 31:13? What do their plans tell us about how our times remain in God’s hands (Ps. 31:15)?
3. How does the house of Simon the leper contrast with the palace of Caiaphas the high priest (v. 3, 6)? How does the naming of Caiaphas the high priest contrast with this unnamed woman who anoints Jesus (v. 7)? What did the indignation of the disciples really say about their hearts and values (v. 8)? Why does Jesus say that what she has done has anointed him for his burial (v. 12)? Why does Jesus insist that the action of this unnamed woman be preached throughout the world (v.13)?
4. What is similar about the preparations for Jesus’ crucifixion in all of these figures (Jesus, his disciples, the Sanhedrin, the unnamed woman)? How do their preparations differ from one another? How are you preparing your life around the crucifixion of Jesus? Where are you resisting his authority (the Sanhedrin), or simply denying the reality of the crucifixion (the disciples)? What is one costly thing you may need to sacrifice for Jesus’ kingdom (the unnamed woman)?