

“Prepare for My Burial”

The Fortieth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 14:1-11; Exodus 29:1-9

On Wednesday of Holy Week, Jesus was teaching in the temple. Later in the day, he took his disciples to the Mount of Olives where he explained to them what he meant when he told them earlier that the temple would be destroyed and that not one stone would be left standing upon another. Jesus took the opportunity to describe for them the signs that will precede the destruction of the temple, as well as those signs which precede his coming at the end of the age. But while Jesus was teaching in the temple and preparing his disciples for what was soon to come, the members of the Sanhedrin were hatching a plot to have Jesus arrested and then put to death. That plot was about to receive a huge boost from a very unexpected source. One of the twelve was ready to betray Jesus, thereby opening a way for the Sanhedrin to have Jesus arrested. It was all coming to pass just as Jesus said that it would. He had predicted his betrayal and arrest while en route to Jerusalem, which will not only fulfill biblical prophecy, but also set the stage for his death and resurrection, the means by which God will save us from our sins.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of Mark, we now come to Mark chapter 14. As we proceed, we need to keep the historical situation in mind in order to fully understand those events which now transpire in the opening verses of Mark 14. Recall that Jesus had entered Jerusalem the preceding Sunday—Palm Sunday. Jesus spent much of his time during the first part of Holy Week in the temple area, not only driving out the merchants who had turned the temple into a den of thieves, but also responding to a series of challenges put to him by the various sects and factions within Judaism. Many of these men who challenged him were members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. Each of these groups approached Jesus, asking him trick questions, designed to get him to say something which would cause him to lose face before the people, or else which would provide grounds for a legal action against Jesus, so that the Sanhedrin could arrest him and put him on trial.

But throughout these repeated exchanges, Jesus not only confounded his questioners, his popularity among the people seemed to grow all the more. Yet, things were not what they seemed. From this point on, the whole tenor and tone of what transpires in Mark’s account takes a very dark and ominous turn. When the Sanhedrin decided that confronting Jesus in public was not getting them what they wanted, instead they began their plotting and scheming in private. Apparently, those plans had not come together until they received an offer to betray Jesus, now recounted by Mark in verses 10-11 of chapter 14. Suddenly, there was a way to have Jesus arrested without arousing the anger of the people. Not surprisingly, the Sanhedrin was delighted by this development. Once betrayed, Jesus will be put on trial and if things went according to plan, Jesus could be quickly put to death.

One thing going on behind the scenes is the erosion of Jesus’ popular support—support which the Pharisees feared since they knew the people hated them. Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph on Sunday. Huge crowds had been following him everywhere he went. But Jesus spent his time in the temple, driving out merchants and debating theology with the Sanhedrin. While the people loved it when Jesus put the members of the Sanhedrin in their place—the people hated the self-righteous Jewish religious leaders—there was growing consternation among the people that Jesus was not doing anything to defeat Rome. Jesus was not speaking out against Roman oppression and injustice. In fact, in Mark 12:13-17 Jesus acknowledged the legitimacy of Caesar as ruler over Israel and even said the tax Caesar placed

upon Israel was to be paid. If Jesus was really the Messiah, why was he not doing those things a prospective king would do to establish his kingdom? Therefore, there was enough consternation about Jesus, that once he was arrested, the people quickly abandoned him and his popular support vanished almost instantaneously. As soon as it appeared that Jesus was not who they thought he was, and once it appeared that Jesus was helpless before the power of Rome, the people turned on him. The people wanted a king, someone to return Israel to greatness. They were not interested in a crucified Messiah who talked about sins and forgiveness, and not about power. While the Pharisees worried about Jesus' popularity, that popularity was not deep as the Pharisees feared, nor would it last beyond Jesus' arrest.

And so as we now move into chapter fourteen of Mark, it becomes clear that two plot lines are simultaneously unfolding in Mark's account. One plot line is that Jesus is teaching in the temple and instructing his disciples, thereby preparing them for his departure (as seen in the Olivet Discourse and in the instructions in the Passover/Lord's Supper that Jesus is about to give to the disciples later on in this same chapter). The other plot line is the simultaneous effort of the Sanhedrin to find some means to have Jesus arrested and killed. In regards to the second of these plot lines, one of the twelve (Judas) will now betray Jesus, giving the Sanhedrin the opening they'd been seeking all along. Knowing what lies ahead, Jesus allows himself to be anointed in preparation for his death and burial. Jesus' messianic mission is almost complete.

In Mark 14, the pace of the gospel begins to quicken and things take on a great sense of urgency. All of those things Jesus has been predicting for some time—his betrayal, arrest, death, and resurrection—are just hours away from fruition. In a literary sense, we are coming to the climax of the gospel narrative. In a redemptive-historical sense, we are coming to those horrible yet wonderful events which lie at the very heart of the gospel.

As these events unfold, we need to remember that Jesus' initial conflict with the religious leaders of Israel began way back in chapter 2:1 during the opening days of Jesus' messianic mission. This conflict continued until Mark 3:6 and then resurfaces throughout the gospel. In Mark 2, Jesus healed a paralytic, and at the same time forgave the man's sins. The Pharisees were outraged by this and called Jesus a blasphemer because he claimed to do only what God could rightly do—forgive sins. As the narrative in Mark 2 unfolds, the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees further intensified when Jesus called Matthew Levi, a tax-collector, to serve as one of his disciples. When Jesus enjoyed table fellowship with Matthew and his "unclean" tax-collecting friends—completely ignoring the unbiblical distinction between clean and unclean concocted by the Pharisees—the Pharisees were indignant because Jesus and his disciples associated with "sinners," ignoring their rules for ritual purity. We also read that Jesus' disciples did not fast, nor did they observe the Pharisaical understanding of the Sabbath. In fact, in Mark 3:6, we read that after Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, "*Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*"

As I pointed out when we covered these earlier chapters of Mark, we must not miss the great irony in Mark 2-3, which now finally culminates in Jesus' betrayal and arrest. Those who are so concerned about Jesus being a "law-breaker," have been plotting to kill him the whole time, in direct violation of the very law they claim to be upholding. Paraphrasing from everyone's favorite movie, "their hypocrisy knows no bounds." And so, after three years of plotting against Jesus, the Pharisees were about to get their wish. One of Jesus' own disciples would betray him for a mere thirty-pieces of silver.

The one thing which had prevented Jesus from being arrested earlier was his popularity with the people, which, as we just noted, was probably not as wide-spread nor as deep as the Pharisees feared. Jesus

himself stated that many of those who followed him were doing so for all the wrong reasons. They saw Jesus as a miracle worker, healer, exorcist, and prophet. Perhaps many believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But the masses followed him because of those things he could do for them, not because Jesus came to save them from their sins. The people did not see the messianic age as that time when God would visit his people with salvation, rescuing them from the guilt and power of sin. Instead, the people hoped that Jesus would return Israel to its former greatness. Jesus was not what they expected nor wanted. At the very moment when it appears that Jesus can do nothing for them, the masses abandon him. All of those things Jesus predicted about his own rejection and suffering would now come to pass. Jesus must endure all of these things to save us from our sins. But he is not yet at the depths of his humiliation. There is much more to come.

That these two plot lines have been running side by side in Mark's account becomes clear in verse 1, when Mark tells us that "*Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away.*" This likely places Judas' act of betrayal and Jesus' anointed for his burial at some point on Wednesday, since the Passover (the "pasha"), was celebrated between Sundown and midnight in two days. The chronology gets complicated here. Since the Jews regarded sunset as the beginning of the new day, this probably places the events of Mark 14:1-11 on Wednesday before sunset, and the rest of the chapter on Thursday after sundown when Jesus institutes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The Feast of Unleavened Bread began on the same day as the Passover, and lasted six days. The Passover lambs were slain on the first day of the feast, which coincided with the Passover (on Friday). This would be the 15th of Nissan, which corresponds to April/May on the modern calendar. Jews simply called the combined "holy" days the "Feast of the Passover."¹

According to Mark's account, it was at this time (on Wednesday) that "*the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. `But not during the Feast,' they said, `or the people may riot.'*" As I mentioned, trying to trip Jesus up in public wasn't working. Furthermore, since the Pharisees understand Jesus' popularity in light of their own unpopularity with the people, they did not yet realize how quickly the popular support for Jesus would evaporate. It is interesting that Mark seems to have such great insight into the nature of the Sanhedrin's plotting. It is possible that Joseph of Arimathea and/or Nicodemus²—who were both likely believers in Jesus and also members of the Sanhedrin—may have divulged this information to the early church after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. This explains why Mark has such a good sense of what was going on in secret, while Jesus was giving his disciples their final instructions on the Mount of Olives.

After telling us of the secret plotting of the Pharisees, in verses 3-9, Mark now describes an event in which Jesus prepares for the inevitable, his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.

In verse 3, the scene shifts to the small village of Bethany—some two miles from Jerusalem. It was here that Jesus spent the nights during his time in Jerusalem. According to Mark, "[Jesus] *was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper.*" This is a rather remarkable thing in its own right. Mark speaks of "Simon the Leper" as though his readers should have known who he

¹ See the discussions in: Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 413-414; and Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 489-490.

² Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 413.

was.³ Perhaps this man was well-known to the early church and it is implied that Jesus had at some point healed him, since Jesus stayed in his home and reclined at table with him. Had he still been afflicted with leprosy, he would have been isolated to keep others from getting the dreaded disease. In any case, that Jesus would stay in the home of someone who once had leprosy and recline at table with someone who was once considered “ceremonially unclean” is yet another indication that Jesus had very little regard for the oral tradition of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus called their tradition nothing but “the rules of men.” Simon is his gracious host and Jesus sees nothing wrong in eating with him.

What happens next is truly remarkable. Keep in mind that this act of faith and tender care for our Lord on the part of this unnamed woman (although in John’s Gospel she is identified as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus—John 12:1-8) stands in utter contrast to the actions of Judas, who about this same time is betraying Jesus. As Mark recounts these events in verse 3, we learn that while Jesus was in Simon’s home, “*a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.*” Nard is an aromatic oil which comes from a root native to India. Once the perfume had been prepared, a single application was placed in a small alabaster flask, which was broken open at the neck at the time of application. Given its great value, it may have been a family heirloom which was passed down for generations from mother to daughter.⁴

Applying this expensive treasure to Jesus’ head is an act of pure devotion and an expression of gratitude for all that Jesus had done for her and for her family. The anointing of Jesus’ head certainly evokes images of royal and priestly anointing found throughout the Old Testament, including Exodus 29:1-9 (our Old Testament lesson), I Samuel 10, and Psalm 133. It is not likely that this woman was self-consciously anointed Jesus as a priest—this was not her place and she was clearly doing this as an act of gratitude. But the symbolism is such that Mark is able to make the point that the Messiah—who was already anointed by the Spirit—is now symbolically anointed with oil, the sign of the Spirit.⁵ And Jesus himself uses this woman’s act of kindness to make another important point.

As Mark recounts what happens next, we read in verses 4-5, that some of those who witnessed this woman’s act of devotion thought it was as a colossal waste of money—these were the Scottish and Dutch disciples. “*Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, ‘Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.’ And they rebuked her harshly.*” Those who objected to her actions, saw the expensive perfume as an object of great value, and therefore wasted by pouring all of it on Jesus’ head. Instead of anointing Jesus, this perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii, which was nearly a year’s wages. Surely, Jesus would have to agree. The money could then be given to the poor—a noble cause and something often done by Jews during the various feasts.⁶ But in these objections to the woman’s act of devotion, we also learn something of the depths of Jesus’ suffering and isolation. He alone knows that his hour is drawing near. He knows that he’s about to die. He knows what this woman did and why she did it. This ritual

³ See the discussion of this kind of eyewitness testimony, see; Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 492.

⁵ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 415.

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 493; Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 416.

anointing is an act of great devotion, and it involves far more than the woman could have ever envisioned. Without knowing it, she is anointing Jesus for his death and burial.

Therefore, Jesus replies quite sharply to the objectors. “*‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.’*” Jesus knew that what she had done was not only appropriate, but that it was demanded because of his approaching death. Says Jesus in verses 7-8, “*The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.*” Jesus’ words echo those of Psalm 41, in which a poor sufferer ultimately triumphs over his enemies, including his friend who betrays him.⁷ The poor need help Jesus says. But their sad plight and the need for God’s people to help them, does not diminish the fact a significant moment in redemptive history is about to transpire. Jesus knew that while the woman performed an act of devotion, he was soon to die. Therefore without knowing it, she was preparing him for burial. In what amounts to a further act of irony, those who died as criminals were not allowed such ritual anointing. Jesus knew he must be anointed now, because such an anointing would be impossible after his crucifixion.⁸

In Psalm 41, those who help the poor and weak will receive a blessing from God. This is very likely in the background of Jesus’ words in verse 9. “*I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.*” While those who thought the anointing of Jesus was a waste of money were sternly rebuked, the woman who showed her devotion to Jesus is given the very blessing promised in the Psalm. Not only does Jesus say that the gospel will be preached throughout the entire world—echoing the words he spoke in Mark 13:10—but when it is, this woman’s act of anointing the poor and weak in preparation for his burial will be remembered. These words of Jesus have been fulfilled yet again this very day as we consider what this woman did for Jesus. No one will forget what she has done and her devotion for Jesus is an example to all of us.

While Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is anointing Jesus’ head in preparation for his death and burial in this amazing act of love and devotion, Judas Iscariot is doing the most dastardly deed imaginable. He is betraying Jesus to the Sanhedrin.

This scene too is set against the backdrop of Psalm 41. The righteous sufferer (Jesus) is now betrayed by one of his closest friends.⁹ In verses 10-11, Mark tells us, “*Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.*” For three years, the Sanhedrin had been looking for a pretext to have Jesus arrested, although those efforts intensified greatly once Jesus reached Jerusalem. They probably could have done so on the grounds of blasphemy—Jesus claimed to be God, either directly or impliedly—but, as we have seen, the Sanhedrin was afraid to do so because of Jesus’ popularity among the people. The nearness of Passover presented an additional problem for them since so many people and pilgrims were in the city. A riot was a real possibility, and should it occur, that would have brought down the wrath of Rome upon the Jews. The Sanhedrin needed to act carefully.

⁷ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 493-494.

⁸ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 494.

⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 495.

Judas, meanwhile, was seeking an opportunity to betray Jesus, although Mark says nothing of Judas' motivation—giving us his usual “nothing but the facts” report of these events. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we read of Judas' greed (Matthew 26:15), while in John 12:6, Luke 22:3, and John 13:2, 27, we read that Judas' act was the work of Satan.¹⁰ This should not come as a surprise to us, since people will do almost anything for money and it has been Satan's purpose from the beginning to snuff out the Messiah. According to John 11:57, by this time, “*the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.*” Judas now offers to lead them to Jesus and point him out to the Jewish authorities. Therefore the plan had been hatched, and would soon be carried out. But as we'll see next time, Jesus still has more to teach his disciples. This includes the institution of that sacrament of his own body and blood. Jesus will also demonstrate to the twelve that he is the Passover lamb and that his death will save his people from their sins.

What then can we take with us by way of application?

The simultaneous plot lines in Mark's account are coming out into the open. While Jesus is teaching the twelve on the Mount of Olives, the Sanhedrin is plotting to kill him. While Mary is showing her devotion to Jesus and unknowingly anointing Jesus for his death and burial, Judas is providing the Sanhedrin with the means to make their evil plan come to fruition. Judas will betray the Savior and lead the Sanhedrin to Jesus so that he might be arrested.

But in these parallel plot lines we see the reality of God's promise to turn evil to good. Jesus knew what lay ahead—he predicted it. He allowed Mary to anoint him for his burial because he knew he was going to die. Jesus chose Judas to be one of the twelve, even though Judas was a devil, because Jesus knew that such a betrayal would set in motion those events which would take him to the cross and then to the empty tomb. Jesus' suffering and humiliation were now reaching their zenith. Jesus endured all of this because he knew that this suffering, rejection, and humiliation was necessary if he were to save us from our sins. This is why he told those complaining about wasting the perfume that, [Mary] *poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.* The faithfulness of Mary and the treachery of Judas stand in bold relief.

Never forget that Jesus endured all of this for us. If you've ever been rejected by friends or family, Jesus knows all about it. His own people (the Jews), his own family (who thought him crazy), and the shepherds of Israel (who accused him of all kinds of things), all rejected him. If you've ever been betrayed by someone close to you, Jesus has too. He knows the sting of such betrayal. For those who have been called to suffer, Jesus knows exactly how you feel and what you are going through. He suffered more than any man who has ever lived. And yet, despite the betrayal, despite the rejection, despite the suffering, and humiliation, Jesus knew that God would turn this to good.

In fact, in Jesus' perfect obedience (in his suffering and humiliation), God will save us from all those times we've rejected others, or when we've been rejected and lashed out in anger. In Jesus' perfect suffering, God saves us from all those times we've caused pain or suffering in others. In Jesus' perfect obedience, God saves us from all of those times when we refused to accept his will. In Jesus' suffering, humiliation and rejection, God saves us from all of these things. Jesus is the faithful sufferer, who never sought his own way, nor his own will. Jesus' only desire was to do the will of his father. He endured betrayal, he endured suffering and he experienced rejection, so that he might save us from our sins.

¹⁰ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 419.