

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Easter Series 2017: Matthew 26:1-46

Benjamin Hanby (1833-1867) wrote the music and lyrics to the spiritual song entitled: "Who is He in yonder stall?" The song gives an overall view of Christ as revealed in the Gospels. It does so by question and answer. The questions read:

*Who is He, in yonder stall,
At whose feet the shepherds fall?*

*Who is He, in deep distress
Fasting in the wilderness?*

*Who is He that stands and weeps
At the grave where Lazarus sleeps?*

*Who is He the gathering throng
Greet with loud triumphant song?*

*Who is He on yonder tree
Dies in grief and agony?*

*Who is He who from the grave
Comes to succour, help, and save?*

The refrain that follows each verse gives the answer, namely:

*'Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!
'Tis the Lord! the King of glory!
At His feet we humbly fall,
Crown Him, crown Him, Lord of all!*

The refrain shows us the main theme of the Gospel according to Matthew who records the life of Christ as Abraham's seed - the Son of promise; and as David's seed - the true King of Israel. The title, "King of Glory" is found in Psalm 24, speaking of Christ, where we read in Psalm 24:9-10: "*Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory. Selah.*" So, in this Gospel, Matthew records the life of the King who is none other than God Himself visiting His people in human form. The Lord Jesus Christ was the promised Emmanuel - God with us! (see Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14)

How good it is to be reminded of this as we commence an Easter series which will cover the last chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew. Today, as Peter Luetchford has already indicated in his introduction, we shall explore Matthew 26:1-46 which describes some of the events leading up to the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first few verses of the chapter make mention of the Passover feast (see Matthew 26:1-6). This annual commemoration reminded the Jews of their deliverance by God from the slavery of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. In those ancient times, strict instructions were given by God concerning the Passover lamb, the blood of which was to shelter the Hebrews from the judgment God was about to pour out on the firstborn of the Egyptians (Exodus 12-13). This would have had particular meaning for the Lord Jesus Christ because He was the Antitype of that ancient paschal lamb. That is, He was the fulfilment of all that was prefigured in that passover lamb. He was declared to be the true Lamb of God by John the Baptist in John 1:29 and John 1:36. This is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 5:7b which states: "*Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.*" His blood shelters all who trust in Him from the judgment of God against unrepentant sinners. At the beginning of Matthew 26, Christ reiterates to His disciples that He, the Son of man, was to be betrayed and crucified (Matthew 26:2). From events that follow, it was clear that the disciples either didn't want to believe this or hadn't fully understood Him.

Matthew 26:3-5 reveal the plotting of the religious leaders against Jesus. The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, Caiaphas. They conspired to take God's Son by subtle means and slay Him. However, they decided to wait until the Passover feast was completely over because they feared an uproar among the people. Many of them had believed in the Lord Jesus. Many had witnessed His miracles. His fame would have been widespread and there would be those who came to the feast who would hope to see Him there.

The scene quickly changes to the house of Simon the leper in Bethany (see Matthew 26:6). A woman came with an alabaster box of ointment and poured the contents on the head of Jesus (Matthew 26:7). The disciples were indignant thinking it could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor (Matthew 26:8-9). Jesus said to them, "*Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me. For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always. For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her*" (Matthew 26:10-13).

Bethany means "house of dates". It was at this house that Jesus was shown hospitality. It was a place where His identity was recognised and where He was served. It was a place where His word was heard and His affections were moved. Are the homes in which we live like this? Would Jesus feel welcome? Would the atmosphere of our houses be characterised by things "*true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report*" (Philippians 4:8)? Would Christ, described by Isaiah as a "*root out of a dry ground*" (see Isaiah 53:2) find our homes oases in a barren land?

The woman with the precious ointment is not named here. She is in the presence of the King! He must have the pre-eminence! The alabaster box would have had a sealed opening into which the oil had been poured originally. The box would have kept the oil pure and retained its fragrance. In this scripture, the expensive oil is myrrh. This oil being bitter to the taste is typical of suffering and it was used in the embalming of corpses. Hence, the words of the Lord Jesus to the disciples who were questioning her use of such a valuable ointment: "*...For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial*" (Matthew 26:12).

The sweet fragrance of myrrh, on the other hand, is typical of the blessings that result from such sufferings. Furthermore, it was used in marriages. Had this woman sacrificed that which she had been keeping for her own wedding day? If so it symbolised the wonder of the love that she had for the Lord Jesus Christ.

How much do we love the Lord Jesus? What are we prepared to do to please Him? What are we prepared to sacrifice for His name's sake? She broke the alabaster box! There was no restraint! The expensive contents were for Him entirely!

In Matthew 26:14-16 we find the proposal of betrayal by Judas Iscariot to the religious leaders. Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve disciples. Interestingly, in Psalm 41:9 it was predicted the Messiah would be betrayed by a friend.

Judas Iscariot, the son of one called Simon, was a false disciple. When the Lord Jesus told His disciples "*...ye are clean*" (John 13:10). He made Judas Iscariot an exception by adding "*...but not all.*" Judas had been sent out with the other disciples to preach and perform miracles in the name of the Lord Jesus; but he lacked true faith. He was the treasurer of this little band; but he was also a thief (see John 12:6). Satan used his weakness regarding his love of money to prompt this disciple to betray the Lord.

Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and agreed a price of thirty pieces of silver for the betrayal of Jesus. Such was the value the religious leaders put on the Christ of God. In fact, in Israel, this was the price of a servant injured by an ox. Christ was the Perfect Servant of God. As prophesied, He would be taken by wicked hands, crucified and slain. Indeed, it was the price predicted for the betrayal of the Messiah in Zechariah 11:12-13. The prophet also stated the money would be cast to the potter in the house of the LORD (Zechariah 11:13). And so it was - as we'll see in the next broadcast!

Later, when the Lord was taken and unjustly condemned, Judas was filled with remorse and confessed he had betrayed innocent blood (see Matthew 27:4). He cast the blood-money into the temple before he went and hung himself (see Matthew 27:5). In John 17:12 the Lord Jesus describes him as "*lost*" and called him the "*son of perdition*", that is, "the son of destruction". His eternity would be spent in Hell. In Judas Iscariot we can learn several lessons:

1. Pretend believers may seem to partake in many of the activities of true believers. This is confirmed in the early part of Hebrews 6.
2. We can see that regret for our actions is not enough to save us. We have to exercise faith and truly repent before God Himself.

3. Third, the love of money will lead to evil (see 1 Timothy 6:10).
4. The Lord knows our hearts through and through. He knows those who have a genuine love for Him and those who merely pay Him lip-service.

In Matthew 26:17-19 we come to the preparation for the feast of unleavened bread. We read: *“Now the first day of the feast of unleavened bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying unto him, Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the passover? And he said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples. And the disciples did as Jesus had appointed them; and they made ready the passover.”*

This account in Matthew is very brief. Luke 22:7-13 gives more detail; but here it is the householder who is emphasised. This man was pleased to allow the Lord to use a guest chamber in his house. The word “goodman” used of him elsewhere shows he was the “head of a family”. However, the passage implies that he was a believer in the Lord Jesus. The words the disciples were to use, namely, *“The Master saith, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples”* (Matthew 26:18) suggest that this house-owner had some insight into the person and purposes of the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus had also said that the room given would be an “upper room”. So it was. The disciples prepared it for the Passover.

In considering the feast of unleavened bread, we recognise that leaven is typical of the defiling power of sin. 1 Corinthians 5:8 identifies it as *“malice and wickedness.”* In Jewish tradition, leaven had to be excluded from the bread of this feast for seven days (see Exodus 12:15). Today, the equivalent of the feast of unleavened bread for a Christian is a life governed by sincerity and truth. Seven is the number of completion and indicates that this purity of life covers the whole age of Christianity.

The betrayal is revealed to the disciples in Matthew 26:20-25 where we read: *“Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve. And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I? And he answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me. The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born. Then Judas, which betrayed him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said.”*

Matthew 26:20-25 speak for themselves. It seems that as soon as Judas realised Jesus knew he was the traitor, Satan entered into him and, under the Saviour’s direction, he left the scene (see John 13:27).

In the absence of Judas, we read in Matthew 26:26-30 that during the Passover feast, the Lord Jesus sets up the manner in which the disciples were to remember Him. The bread which He blessed and broke, He presented to them as a symbol of His body. His personal body was yet to be subjected to crucifixion. It is through the offering of His body that we are sanctified (Hebrews 10:10). He then took the cup and thanked God for it. This represented the New Covenant in His blood (see 1 Corinthians 11:25). The latter is a covenant of blessing and like every covenant was ratified by the blood of a sacrifice. Christ’s blood was shed for many for the remission of sins. His was the ultimate sacrifice.

This particular covenant is an everlasting one. It is the consummation of all previous covenants. It is a covenant characterised by grace. The blood of Christ is the righteous ground upon which the covenant is founded and sustained (Hebrews 13:20). The covenant therefore applies to all those redeemed by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ who is, Himself, its Mediator (Hebrews 9:15). The seal of the covenant is the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 1:13-14; Ephesians 4:30). This covenant will never be superseded. Do you remember the Lord Jesus Christ in the way He ordained? Do you regularly take the bread that speaks of His body and the cup that speaks of the new covenant in His blood? All the disciples were to do so!

The Lord then stated that He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until in the Father’s kingdom (Matthew 26:29). This looks on to the time of His future reign of one thousand years. It suggests that He takes the place of a Nazarite (see Numbers 6:1-21) until that joy-filled day. On the other hand, it emphasises His kingship because Matthew’s version of events does not mention the ascension of the Lord Jesus. It finishes with Christ commissioning His followers to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:20)

The hymn that Jesus sang with His disciples was probably the last part of the “Hallel”. This included the Psalms from Psalm 113 to Psalm 118 which were sung at different points during the Feast of Passover. The last of these speaks of Christ as the Stone who was rejected by the builders being made the Headstone of the corner. Jesus and His disciples then went out to the Mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem (Matthew 26:30). This, Judas Iscariot knew well; it was a place regularly visited by Jesus and His apostles.

Jesus then predicted that the disciples would forsake Him as prophesied by Zechariah: *"All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad"* (Matthew 26:31, see Zechariah 13:7). He then reassures them by stating, *"But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee"* (Matthew 26:22) Peter was not prepared to accept this. He said, *"Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended."* Peter's heart was ruling his head. Jesus had to say to him, *"Verily I say unto thee, that this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice"* (Matthew 26:33-34).

This prediction of the Lord should have stopped Peter in his tracks. Yet, he still resisted his Lord, saying, *"Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee"* (Matthew 26:35). The self-confidence of Peter, destroyed a true devotion to Christ and His interests. Yet, we must remember, the rest of the disciples said the same thing (Matthew 26:35). They knew that Christ always spoke the truth so why did they resist Him? Unbelief! It's the same with us today. The Lord may make His will implicitly clear to us, but unbelief causes us to doubt, hesitate or resist Him.

Matthew 26:36 leads to another scene, namely, the Garden of Gethsemane (the place of the oil-press). Most of the disciples are told to wait while Jesus went to pray; but he took Peter, James and John a little further into the garden with Him. He was in deep sorrow and revealed that He was sorrowful, even unto death (Matthew 26:37). He told them to wait and watch with Him before he went a little further and fell on His face and prayed, saying, *"O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt"* (Matthew 26:39). What amazing words! The Son who came to do His Father's will shows us how a dependent man is to pray in the most awful of circumstances. The cup that His Father offered was one full of the judgment of God against sin. In drinking it, the Lord Jesus would exhaust the judgment of God which should have fallen upon us. No physical suffering could match the torture endured by the soul of Christ for our sin. Knowing all this, He still prayed, *"...nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt"* (Matthew 26:39)

After agonising in prayer, He came to the three and found them asleep. Addressing Peter, He asked why they couldn't watch with Him for an hour (Matthew 26:40). What a sad indictment! And yet, we have to ask, how long do we spend each day with the Lord in prayer? Jesus added, *"Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."* (Matthew 26:41) This certainly applies to us. If we wish to avoid having our faith continually proved, then it is important to be alert and constant in prayer.

Jesus went away a second time, and prayed, saying, *"O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done"* (Matthew 26:42). God be praised! He submits Himself to the will of God as He faced the most horrific of circumstances. He returned to the disciples to find them asleep (Matthew 26:43). This time, He didn't wake them but went and prayed for a third time saying the same words (Matthew 26:44). Three times, He pleaded with His Father concerning the same matter. He even used the same words. This assures us that we can approach our Father about a serious matter on several occasions and use the same words with which to do so. Other scriptures tell us something of the agony of the Lord Jesus on this occasion. His sweat was likened to great drops of blood. Do we pray like this knowing *"the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man achieves much"*? (See James 5:16.)

Our passage today concludes with the following: *"Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."* Whether or not the disciples consciously heard these words is debatable because they were asleep. They did not have to watch with Him any longer. The agonising time of prayer was over. They could relax. Finally, He said, *"Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me"* (Matthew 26:45-46). He roused them, not in the hope of escape, but in order to go forward and face the foe!

May our consideration of this passage colour our thinking this Easter time and lead us to a greater appreciation of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus at Calvary.

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