

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Night Scenes of Scripture: A night with the Son of God - Matthew 26

It seemed to do the trick with Ebenezer Scrooge. Journeying back through time he saw the things that had already happened and came back a changed man. We shall this morning, as we continue our look at nights spent with the Lord Jesus, travel back in time to the two nights immediately prior to His crucifixion. It would be a marvellous thing if we were to return to the present changed and more fully committed to living for Jesus. We shall see how very different the heart of man can be. We shall see, too, the calm serenity of the Lord, despite the tumultuous happenings around Him.

Let us start our journey then by reading Matthew 26:6-13. Similar accounts of this beautiful act of worship can be found in Mark 14 and John 12. *“And when Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “To what purpose is this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor.” But when Jesus was aware of it, He said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial. Assuredly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.”*”

Six days before the Passover Jesus had arrived in Bethany, having returned from His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Now on the night before Jesus was betrayed, a special meal is made for Him in the house of Simon the leper. We are not told which leper this was, nor whether there was any relationship between him and Martha, Mary and Lazarus, but they, together with Jesus and His disciples, are present at this meal. Did the disciples, or Lazarus, know that this was to be the last time that Jesus was to be in Bethany before Jesus died? Possibly not, but Mary comes and seizes the opportunity to honour her Lord. She brings with her an alabaster jar of expensive perfume worth more than a year's wages.

Some have speculated that this may have been given to her as a dowry. If so, then what she does next is all the more wonderful. Coming in, before her friends and family – were some of her neighbours there too? – she breaks the jar and pours the perfume over Jesus' head, and then upon His feet. This act of anointing is highly symbolic. In the Old Testament, we find that a king (1 Samuel 10:1) or a prophet (1 Kings 19:16) would be anointed by the pouring of oil upon the head. In so anointing Jesus' head, Mary identifies her Lord as the King of kings, and the greatest Prophet of all. Indeed He is the One who has, and will, fulfil all that the prophets before Him had said.

And yet He is so much more than this. Mary recognises the true worth of the Man before her. She was in the presence of none other than the Son of God. The One who had spoken and worlds had come into being. The One who upholds all things by His power. So she falls at His feet, and anoints them too. What wonderful spiritual perception! How often do we have a clear sense of His uniqueness and importance? We should never forget that the One who gave Himself for us was, and is still, wholly God. He may in wonderful grace have stooped to experience life, in all its many facets, as we do. He may have become a man so that He could lay down His life for us, but He was never just like us. Mary recognised this as she poured out her perfume upon His feet.

But then she goes further. In total surrender, she takes her hair, her glory, and with it she wipes Jesus' feet dry. Can you imagine this? How utterly demeaning, naturally speaking! So utterly to cast aside all dignity in front of friends and family, in the place where she was known! She would have to face these same people later, when Jesus was gone, and yet still she does what she does.

Even as she is doing this, there is an indignant murmuring amongst some, “Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? What a waste!” Jesus cuts dead all further criticism of her. What Mary had done was something that all of them should also have done. Worship for who He is, is never out of place or wasted. Mary knew this.

Others would later come and anoint His body ready for burial. Mary had done so now, whilst Jesus could appreciate it all the more. She had done so while she had the opportunity to do so. If she had left this act just one more day, then she would have been too late. Jesus' commendation of Mary, “she has done what she could”, is the highest tribute the

Master can pay. Jesus does not expect us to do what we cannot do. But if only we all, like Mary, did what we could, how vitally different our world would be! Perhaps we would regain something of the freshness and vigour that so characterised the early disciples.

I can remember, many years ago, thinking that I could be a missionary to what was then the Soviet Union. How great a service that would have been! But my dreams never got further than the bookshop, and a Russian phrasebook. How often we dream great dreams for Jesus - huge missions, all-encompassing social programs, at the expense of doing what we can. We can become so busy preparing for what we never do, that we have no time to do what we are able to. Let us resolve, as from today, to do what we can for Jesus. Small kindnesses, a word about the Gospel to a neighbour, a simple word of praise. Mary did what she could, when she could. We have no time, other than the present, to live for Jesus.

Before we move on to our second night with the Son of God, it is worth noting that, as she came to Jesus, Mary broke her jar. In doing so, she wholly committed herself to giving all she had to Jesus. Had she just poured out the ointment, she might have been tempted to keep just a little back for herself. It is said of William the Conqueror that one of the first things he did on landing in Britain was to burn his boats. There could be no going back if the going got tough! It was conquer or die! So often I might just give a little, feeling that if I give too much, I might find the cost too great. How very much I need the spirit of Mary in my heart. Is He worth my wholehearted commitment? Does He deserve it? As we come to our second night with the Son of God, we will see that the answer to these questions is an emphatic "yes".

Perhaps prompted by Jesus' rebuke, Judas goes out and agrees to sell Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Exodus 21:32 reveals that this was the price to be paid for a handicapped slave. Was this all that Jesus was worth to Judas? How could it be that Judas, who had spent the last three years with the Son of God and had seen such amazing sights, could so completely misjudge His worth? The calculating treachery of Judas stands in cold contrast to the warm appreciation of Mary.

But Judas only betrayed himself. Jesus was in complete control of all the events that would climax at Calvary. But, before then, He gathers His disciples together for one last time. Having sent two of the disciples on ahead to prepare the Passover celebration, Jesus determines to celebrate this final Passover with His own. The One who was to become our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7) would do all that the Law required of Him. It is worth noting, in passing, how the room that Jesus uses was prepared and ready for the Master. What an example to us is this unknown servant of God! We need to hold all that we own, including ourselves, ready for Jesus' use, as soon as He calls for it.

That Jesus knew all that was to come to pass in the next 24 hours adds immense poignancy to the events of this special Passover feast. It was customary as part of the Passover meal to recite the words of the Hallel. This consists of the words of Psalms 107 to 118. Let us picture for a moment, in our mind's eye, this warm sultry evening, and hear the fine male voices as they join to sing these words. Words penned so many years before, now coming inexorably to completion. What thoughts went through our blessed Lord's mind as He sang His part:

"Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good. His mercy endures for ever" (Psalm 107:1). Give thanks for Calvary and all that He was about to suffer!

"I am gone like a shadow when it lengthens; I am shaken off like a locust. My knees are weak through fasting, and my flesh is feeble from lack of fatness. I also have become a reproach to them; when they look at me they shake their heads" (Psalm 109:23-25) Could any man not shudder at the physical agonies and emotional stress which He knew that He would soon endure.

"The dead do not praise the LORD" (Psalm 115:17) But this was to be His lot in less than 24 hours! And yet, through death, eternal praise to God would result.

"The pains of death encompassed me, and the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me; I found trouble and sorrow" (Psalm 116:3) "And being in an agony, He prayed more earnestly." (Luke 22:44) His prayers were never anything but wholly earnest.

"The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? ... The LORD has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death... The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. This was the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it... Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar" (Psalm 118:6, 18, 22-24 and 27). In the words of GA Lucas' hymn:

*We think of Thy devotion
Thy blest obedience rare;
Thy holy, deep emotion
Thy grief that none could share.*

What precious words about the unique Son of God! As we consider the enormity of His sacrifice for us, we realise that we, as it were, are floating on a bottomless well of love. Nothing could deflect the obedient Son from His Father's purpose. And yet how great the cost! How utterly remarkable that He could with a full heart sing those words, "bind the sacrifice..." He endured all this, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, in Hebrews 12:2-3: "*who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.*" And as the hymn comes to a close, we hear the Lord sing the same words that He had started with: "Oh, give thanks to the LORD for He is good, His mercy endures forever."

As we consider such a blessed Person, we are reminded of the words of the hymn:

*Well might the sun in darkness hide,
As His dear cross appears.
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt mine eyes to tears*

It is all the more remarkable that, with His mind so full of Calvary, the Lord could still stoop to wash His disciple's feet. As we looked at this event in our radio talk last week, we shall pass over it today, save to remind ourselves of the Lord's own words in Matthew 10:24, "*A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.*" The more we concentrate on Calvary, the more we shall be of use to Him and to our fellow believers.

Once the Passover meal was finished, Judas withdraws to pursue his terrible course. Jesus has one final gift to leave His disciples. He institutes a new, a better, feast of remembrance. Let us read together His words in Matthew 26:26-30: "*Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."* And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."

In the simple emblems of the bread and the wine, Jesus leaves His followers with the most powerful reminder of His love for them. In the one loaf we have a picture of the body of Jesus. His body that had gone about doing good. His body that had touched the leper, and so many other needy individuals. His body that had honoured the Father in all that He had done. His body was now to be broken for them. But perfect as His life had been, it was insufficient. There was also the cup of wine to remind them, and us, that His blood was about to be spilt. The writer to the Hebrews puts it very clearly when he said that "without shedding of blood, there is no remission." His perfect life, and death, were required for a righteous God to forgive us our many sins.

Let us weigh clearly the importance of this occasion. Here we are, just hours from betrayal and arrest. How does Jesus spend His final hours of freedom, so to speak? Not in self-pleasing, or relaxation. Not even in holy communion with His Father. No, He chooses to spend it with His own followers, leaving them an example and a command: "Do this for a remembrance of Me." How much do we value this time of remembrance? It ought to be the central feature of the life of every church and every individual believer.

Secular work is important, family time together is important, evangelism is important, but none, quite simply, are as important as our presence at this remembrance feast. Week in, week out, at least once a week we should be there, ready, like Mary, to worship the Saviour. Society increasingly today makes regular attendance and wholehearted commitment to this special time difficult. Nevertheless, it only increases the value of our being there. Can I offer to the Lord that which costs me nothing?

In prison, Joseph said to Pharaoh's butler "Remember me when it is well with you" (Genesis 40:14). How sad it was that it is recorded that the butler forgot Joseph. And yet how prone we are to be like that butler. Without a weekly reminder, and even sometimes with, we forget all too quickly the importance, and the cost, of what Jesus accomplished for us at Calvary.

And yet this remembrance feast is not just a looking back. It is a time to look forward, too. In Paul's account of this night with the Son of God, in 1 Corinthians 11, we read the striking words, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes."

Week by week, we silently testify to this world that Jesus is coming again. We refresh our hearts with the thought that soon, very soon, our Saviour will return, and we shall no longer need to be reminded of Him. We shall see Him, those nail-pierced hands and feet, and we shall be like Him. If I knew that today was to be the last opportunity that I was to get to obey this command to remember Him, I don't suppose that I would miss it for anything. Let us live like this then. Each week let us suppose that this will be the last opportunity that we shall have to come, like that one foreign leper, to give Him thanks.

Having finished the meal, and having left His disciples this command to remember Him, Jesus gets up and leaves with His disciples. He had perfectly finished His earthly ministry. In all that He had done, He had pleased the Father. And now He was ready to lay down His life as the ultimate sacrifice. He alone was able to do this, for in the words of the centurion, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

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