

The Plot and its Paradox

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[0 : 0 0] an 18th century Scottish poet was plowing his field one day to try to make a garden. And as he was doing that, he noticed a whole bunch of mice scurrying beneath his feet and then realized that he had unwittingly dug up a mice nest.

And reflecting on that experience and how he had unintentionally ruined the lives of these comfortable mice who had this nice home, he penned this famous line of his poem, which is entitled, To a Mouse, the line reads, The best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry.

And John Steinbeck, of course, borrowed from that line for the title of his novel, Of Mice and Men, which talks about George and Lenny, whose simple dream of having a farm to themselves and petting soft animals is dashed to pieces by a series of unforeseen events.

And that's true, isn't it? The best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry. Our best laid plans. Sometimes it's our own doing. Sometimes it just comes at us seemingly out of nowhere.

But for the Christian who trusts in the sovereignty of God, this is only half of the story. Because as Proverbs 16, 9 says, The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

[1 : 2 0] So our plans are contingent, variable, and uncertain. But God's plan is unchanging and eternal and sovereign. In this passage, we see people making schemes, plans.

They plot against Jesus. And there's also people who are planning things for him in a positive way, preparing the way for him, trying to help him. But there's one plan that prevails in and through them all in this passage, and that's God's sovereign plan to save his children through the substitutionary death of Jesus.

That's the main point of this passage. So first, we're going to talk about the Jewish leaders' paradoxical plot. And then we'll talk about Mary's paradoxical preparation. And then finally, we'll talk about God's sovereign plan, which prevails in and through them all.

So this narrative follows on the heels of Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. And it says in verse 45 and verse 46, Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.

But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So there's a deliberate contrast here set up between the many Jews who believed in him and the Jews who reported Jesus to the Pharisees.

[2 : 3 5] So that contrast seems to indicate that there was some malicious intent behind these Jews who went to the Pharisees. And perhaps they had seen that embarrassing conversation that the Jewish leaders of the synagogue had with the blind men, the man who was born blind that Jesus healed.

And they had this embarrassing conversation with him. And they got so angry with him, they expelled him from the synagogue. So maybe these people had seen that encounter. And so now they were fearful. They wanted to make sure they're on the Jewish leader's good side.

So maybe that's the reason they go to him to report this miracle that had happened because they feel like they should know. And then this is how the report was received.

Verses 47 and 48. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, So the chief priests were priests that belonged to the family of the high priest.

There was one high priest over all the priests. And they were influential members of the Sanhedrin, which is the highest ruling body of the Jews at the time under Roman rule.

[3 : 47] And so the Pharisees were an influential faction within that group. And they're the ones that hear this report. And if you just think about this for a second, of this report taking place and this Jewish leader's discussing this, it's kind of an incredible discussion because they're not inquiring about who this man truly might be because he just raised a dead man to life.

Think about that. It's not just a story you read. This happened. He just raised a dead man to life. And they're not talking, Okay, so who is this guy? They're asking, Well, people are going to believe in him.

And what's the problem with that? So for this man performs many signs. Well, that's wonderful. Is it not? If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Well, that's great news too. If he's such a man that you can perform this miracle.

And then finally, he says, And the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. Ah, that's what the fuss is all about.

That's where the rubber meets the road. The Jewish leaders were not concerned about identifying Jesus. They were concerned to preserve the status quo, to protect their own rule, their own power, their own prestige.

[4 : 58] Because even though they were ruled by the Roman Empire, as the leaders who were charged with leading the Jewish people, they still had a lot of privileges. And they did not want to forfeit that. And so that's the concern, is that now that Jesus has such a following, and he has done such a spectacular miracle, one after another, the messianic expectation is at a fever pitch.

Then they're worried that there's going to be a revolution. They're worried that everyone will go after Jesus, and then the Romans will have to put their foot down to stomp out the revolution. And in doing so, the people who are in charge will lose control.

That's what they fear. And so they would, and not just Jesus, right? They want to kill Lazarus. The man that was raised from the dead, they want to kill him again.

They would seek to undo God's miracle in order to snuff out faith in Jesus. And it's easy to judge them, but this selfishness, the instinct for self-preservation is real.

It's alive in us as well, isn't it? Because we like to compartmentalize our lives. This part's for you, God.

[6 : 12] It's all for you. But this, this is my, yeah. This is my life. This is my time. This is my money. And as soon as God seeks and demands your allegiance, even in all of those areas, we protest because we want to preserve the status quo.

We want to protect our prestige. We want to preserve our plans. But Jesus is not a king who shares his throne. Jesus is not a king who shares his rule over our lives and our hearts.

He demands everything. He teaches in Matthew 16, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. If we seek to preserve our privileges, our plans, and our power, we will experience none of God's privileges, God's plan, God's power.

So I warn you, if you're not a believer and you're here with us this morning, it's costly to follow Jesus. He demands your everything. But you'll get far more in return because you'll have God.

[7 : 32] And so, in opposing Jesus, these Jewish leaders, in trying to preserve their own status quo, they find themselves on the wrong side of history. What plans, powers, and privileges are we clinging to that Jesus is demanding of us?

And at this time, as the Jewish leaders are debating how best to respond to the Jesus phenomenon, one member, the most influential and prominent member of the Sanhedrin, the high priest, Caiaphas, speaks.

Verses 49 and 50. You know nothing at all, nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

So this is a classic instance of John's use of double meaning. We've seen that throughout the Gospel of John because Caiaphas' suggestion is, it might at the first glance seem pious, but actually it's very calculating and pragmatic.

What it's saying, to use the vernacular, is basically this. You amateurs, you have no idea what you're talking about. It's far better for you, the ruling party, if one man dies as a scapegoat for the whole nation.

[8 : 43] That's what he's saying. So frame Jesus as the agitator of the people. Blame him as the seditious revolutionary who was stirring up the pot. And if you blame him and then let the Romans deal with him, then you'll simultaneously subdue the masses and appease the Romans.

It's a stroke of political genius. He's surely experienced. But Caiaphas, like so many other people in the Gospel of John, speaks better than he knows.

Because he says, it is better for you that one man should die for the people. And the word for in Greek is a very specific preposition that implies substitution.

It has sacrificial overtones. So the fact that this one man should die for the people, of course, while Caiaphas doesn't know that this is going to happen, Jesus is going to die as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And John comments on this. He knows. He says, verse 51 and 52, he did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

[9 : 55] And not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So John notes the irony of Caiaphas' declaration. He says one thing, but in saying that, he's also prophesying.

Unwittingly becomes a mouthpiece of God declaring that Jesus will be the sacrificial lamb who saves us and redeems us from our sin. And when he says that God will, he will gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad, this is a reference to chapter 10, which we saw a couple weeks ago, where Jesus says, I am the good shepherd.

I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep. And then he says this, and I have other sheep that are not of this fold.

I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice so there will be one flock, one shepherd. Because Jesus' mission is not just to save the Jewish nation.

It's to save people, his children from every nation. And so he says here, like he's going to gather into one flock by dying as the Lamb of God who takes with the sin of the world.

[10 : 59] And so the priests, the Jewish leaders, were concerned with preserving their place, the temple, and their nation, the people, right? And then Caiaphas unwittingly prophesied that it's better for the people and for the nation for Jesus to die.

And that those two words, people and nation, later the church, adopts those languages to refer to themselves because that's what Jesus does. He brings about the church. which is a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, it says in 1 Peter 2, 9.

That's who we are. People all over the world will divide over race. They will divide over nationality. They will divide over ethnicity. But Christ's substitutionary debt brings about a new race, a new nation, a new people, and that's his people.

That's the church, united from every nation under God. And he calls them children of God, knowing that God has already chosen them and given them to his son Jesus.

So, it says in verse 53, from that day on, they made plans to put him to death. The high priest's advice is accepted, and from that day on, they resolved to put Jesus to death.

[12 : 16] So, you can see already here that the verdict has been given before the trial. they're not going to arrest him to try him. They're going to arrest him to kill him. And so, in verse 54, it says, Jesus no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness to a town called Ephraim.

And there he stayed with the disciples. So, the arrest warrants out, as we see in verse 57. And that's the Jewish leader's paradoxical plot. And now, let's turn to Mary's paradoxical preparation, starting in chapter 12, verse 1.

It says, Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So, they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance.

Of the perfume. Jesus has now returned to Bethany. Bethany was where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. And then now he returns there and the family hosts a dinner in his honor to thank him and to honor him.

[13 : 33] And as the dinner is happening, Mary anoints Jesus with an expensive ointment made from pure nard's perfume and wipes his feet with her hair.

So, anointing, if you might recall from the Old Testament, is a practice intended to set apart kings in particular and prophets and priests for God's service.

And so, it's reserved not for everyone, but for people who have been specially set aside for God's service. The prophets, priests, and kings. And that, of course, makes sense for Mary to do that, right?

Because Jesus is the one that fulfills all of those Old Testament figures. He's the ultimate prophet. He's the ultimate priest. He's the ultimate king. So, it is very appropriate for her to anoint her this way. But, something unusual is going on here because usually you anoint people on their head.

But here it says Mary anointed him on his feet. And, if you check the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, it's in Matthew 26 and Mark 14, we find out that, I mean, she actually anointed the whole body, which is why they highlight the head.

[14 : 45] But, but it seems John here is intentionally highlighting when the part when she was highlighting, she was anointing the feet. And why? Why is she highlighting the feet? Because that's a sign of self-abasement.

Because it was customary for the host of the dinner to provide for the washing of the guest's feet. But that was done by servants, not by the host.

And it was done with towels, not with the hair. And it was considered dishonorable in this culture for a woman in polite company to let down their tresses.

Yet she does that and wipes his feet with her hair and the expensive perfume. because Mary, this is a gesture of great humility and love because Mary perceives Jesus to be so worthy of honor and she sees herself to be so unworthy to be with Jesus.

She does what she can think of, the most radical thing she can think of doing to pour out the most expensive perfume she has and washes his feet with her hair.

[15 : 56] And there's such a contrast with the Jewish leaders, isn't it? They're trying to kill him to preserve their rule. But Mary here is seeking to anoint him and to set him up, prepare him for his rule.

And this was not your ordinary expensive perfume. It says, verse 4 and 6, it says, 4 to 6, it says, But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he who was about to betray him, said, Why was this oin and not sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor?

He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. And having charge of the money back, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

So the value of the perfume is 300 denarii. A denarii, one denarii, is the wage of a full day's work for a common worker. So 300 denarii, if you count weekends off or whatever, like one day off in a week, it's about a year's wage.

And if you consider our context, Cambridge, the median income is about \$75,900, \$76,000. Okay? So this is about a \$76,000 perfume in that context.

[17 : 11] That's a lot of money. You can do a lot for the poor with that money. And so that's about as expensive as the most expensive perfume in our society now, according to the World Guinness Book.

So that's really expensive. And the reason seems to be that it's pure nard, right? Nard is perfume, oil taken from the nard plant which grows in India, which is far.

So it's exotic origin and also it's, you know, generous quantity. It says it was a full pound, right? That's almost, that's three-fourths of a pint. That's a lot of oil. And that's, so the exotic origin and then the generous quantity and then the pure quality says it's pure nard.

Those three factors seem to make this really, really expensive. It's probably the most expensive thing she owns. And that tells us that this is not a measured, you know, calculated generosity.

She didn't, you know, plan this and said, you know, oh, you know, I can't afford to give her that but I'll give him this. And she was not planning a gift in that way. This is a lavish gesture of love.

[18 : 17] And that's precisely what Judas Iscariot who's about to betray him does not understand. He sees the price tag on the perfume and not the infinite value and worth of the man standing before him.

His greed masquerades as charity. Now his mind wanders to all the stuff he could have bought with that money. But Mary, he's not constrained by necessity, right?

I mean, think about it this way. We don't spare expenses for the people we love, right? That's why parents buy, you know, expensive shoes for their toddlers even though they're going to outgrow it in a couple months and they'll never remember ever wearing it, right?

That's why, you know, lovers buy each other expensive diamond rings when a simple wedding band will do. You don't have to do that.

But people do as a lavish gesture of love. Mary is so exceedingly grateful for what Jesus has done for her in raising her brother from the dead and she is so convinced of the surpassing worth of Jesus who can raise even the dead to life.

[19 : 36] This is not a calculated benevolence, no. She wants to do anything she can to express her love, her gratitude and you know what? The more costly, the more difficult the gesture, the better for that purpose.

So she grabs the most expensive thing she can find, pours it on his feet, wipes his feet with her hair. And Christian brothers and sisters, isn't that not how we love our Savior Jesus too?

This is not a foreign sentiment. This is not an aberration. This is not an anomaly. That's the heartbeat of every single Christian who has been indwelt by the Spirit of God. Would you not if our Lord called you to give up everything you have and follow Him?

Would you not if He called you to leave your family and your friends to go to the ends of the earth to be His missionary? Would you not want your every child, your every friend, your every family member to be devoted to His service?

That's the heart of the Christian. That's the heart of love. And not because we're so great and noble and loyal to Jesus, but because He's loved us in such an amazing, radical way.

[20 : 52] Because He loved us first. Because He paid the ultimate sacrifice and died for our sins. So out of joy, out of love, out of gratitude, that's our heart.

And so Jesus rebukes Judas. Verse 7, leave her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.

for the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me. So the word keep is to continue, to let it continue.

So He's saying, let her continue this because this is a preparation for my day of burial. And there's something paradoxical about that too, isn't it? Because Mary here is not aware of that.

Mary here is simply preparing. She wants to make Him king. She wants to say, you're king. You should be the true king over us. So she anoints Him on not knowing that she's preparing Him for His burial.

[22 : 00] Because Jesus knows that His time on earth is coming to an end. He's going to die for our sins. He's going to rise again. And He's going to ascend into heaven. And because of that, He says, the poor you always have with you, but you will not always have me.

Jesus is not denigrating and caring for the poor. All Christians are called to care for the poor. But God, He is God. Infinite value, infinite worth is His.

So this is an appropriate gesture, He says, to Judas. And ironically, it's not for His inauguration, but for His burial. In fact, as John would put it, more precisely, His death is His inauguration.

His cross, where He dies, is His throne. That's the way in which He comes into His lordship, His kingdom. That's how He creates His kingdom, His people, through His death on the cross.

That brings us to our final point, God's sovereign plan. Because we've seen the Jewish leaders' paradoxical plot, we've seen Mary's paradoxical preparation, and we now see God's sovereign plan woven throughout this entire passage.

[23 : 10] Because look, go back with me in chapter 11, verse 54. It said that Jesus no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness to a town called Ephraim.

So Jesus left Bethany where Jesus raised last from the dead because He was about to be killed. There were people out to get Him. So He did not walk openly, He says. He was hiding.

And He leaves Bethany for that reason. But then look again in chapter 12, verse 1. When the Passover feast is at hand, it says that Jesus, fully knowing that there is an arrest warrant out for Him, He says, therefore, He says, He came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus has raised from the dead.

So earlier, He left Bethany in order to hide from the people who were trying to kill Him. And now He returns to Bethany where the same people are trying to kill Him. And the only reason supplied by the text for this curious behavior seems to be that the festival of the Passover was at hand.

So what's going on? Why? Why the Passover? Because the Passover, of course, celebrated the night when the Israelites were still in captivity in Egypt. The angel of death came as the last plague over the Egyptians to kill all the firstborn of Egypt and Israelites as well, except for the Israelites' household who had taken, who had killed the blameless lamb and daubed the blood on their doors.

[24 : 34] to tell the angel of death to signify that, no, there was a substitution here. The lamb has died instead of the firstborn. And Jesus, working under God's sovereign guidance, His Father's sovereign guidance, knows that when Passover comes, His time to die has come.

That's why when the Passover comes, the town that He had fled just earlier, a few verses earlier, He returns to it. Because He is the Passover lamb whose sacrifice spares us, saves us.

Moreover, as we saw earlier, right, Mary, who anoints Jesus and unwittingly prepares Him for His burial, even the Jewish leaders who seek to kill Jesus, they're all playing right into God's hands, aren't they?

They don't know that. They don't know that what they're doing is serving God's sovereign plan of redemption, but it is. And that's how God works in and through and over all that we do.

And so, Peter, after Jesus' resurrection, in a sermon that he gives to the early church in Acts chapter 2, says this, men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

[26 : 12] This is the mystery of how God's sovereign will works with our human will, right? The Jews, on their own accord, plot and agree to arrest and crucify Jesus, but even their rebellious, sinful deeds were according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

Sometimes, we picture God like a divine shortstop. You guys know the position in baseball? Like, they catch the most balls that are hit, right? They're the ones that kind of make up for your mistakes, salvage the play or salvage the game, right?

We think of God like that sometimes, right? We make all these mistakes, we mess up things and then God just kind of frantically going around trying to make things okay to salvage our lives. That's not how it works, right?

That's not at all the picture of the sovereign God. All of our mistakes, all that we ever do, God intends for good. He intends for His sovereign purposes.

He's not reactionary. He's sovereign. And His ultimate plan is to save His, His children for His glory through the substitutionary death of Jesus.

[27 : 36] And that's why Christians, we so often quote Romans 8, 28, 30 to one another, right? Which says, and we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.

For those who are called according to His purpose, for those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those whom He predestined, He also called. And those whom He called, He also justified. And those whom He justified, He also glorified. See, all that we do, everything that happens in our life, God does, works out for our good.

And what is good? It's not our own selfish perceptions of good. It's not our own perception of earthly goods. He's going to give me whatever I want. He's going to let me fulfill my plans.

No, that's not the good. The good is this redemption plan, salvation plan. We're going to be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. We're going to be glorified with Him.

[28 : 35] That good, that ultimate good, that plan is unavoidable for the children of God. God sovereignly accomplishes that plan.

So then, the lowest moments of your life that you're ashamed of, right? As well as the highest moments that fill you with great joy and pride.

The biggest mistakes you've ever made in your life. As well as the best decisions you've ever made. All your failures and sins.

If you have entrusted your life to Jesus, they will all invariably, unavoidably, ineluctably lead to God's ultimate salvation, your salvation and glorification in Jesus Christ.

And what does that mean for us? As Christians, that means we never need to despair. We're always a people of hope. Because maybe if you look at your life and then you mourn the painstakingly slow process of sanctification, you see your own sin, your own unworthiness before God, then you can be assured this morning that God is at work, that God has saved you.

[29 : 49] He's saving you and He will save you. Perhaps you look at your life full of suffering and sorrows and start to doubt God's good intentions for you.

Well, from this you can be assured that God's plan for you is good. It's to save through His Son, Jesus Christ. Maybe you're anxious.

Maybe you're a type of person, the worst possible scenario is the one that always races through your mind whenever you're thinking about something that's coming up. You're anxious, you're worried, you're fearful.

fearful about what might happen, what the future holds. Well, then you can put your fears to rest because God's ultimate design for you is not suffering.

That's the penultimate design. The ultimate design is sanctification. It's glorification. salvation. It's not destruction but salvation.

[31 : 00] Martin Luther King Jr. once said, the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. And we could say from this passage, the arc of human history is also long but it always bends toward God's sovereign plan to save His people through Jesus.

Christ. Let's pray. God, we praise you that you are not powerless, that you are not limited, that your arms are not too short to save but you are sovereign and you will accomplish your sovereign purposes to save your children in the end.

Lord, we are grateful. We praise you. Help us to live in light of that wonderful truth so that we may be comforted in our suffering, assured in our uncertainties and so that we, like Mary, may be devoted to you in love.

in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Thank you.