

# THE CROSS MEANS EVERYTHING

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*By the Book™* A Chapter by  
Chapter Bible Study Series  
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## Let's Begin

*When I was a pastor in Jacksonville, our church hosted an annual pastors' conference. It grew to be one of the largest of its kind in the country. A few days before the event, virtually all our ministries came to a screeching halt and focused almost exclusively on making this thing happen. All our energies were funneled into one channel.*

*Beginning in chapter twenty-six, every event is funneled into one channel: the cross. Jesus' public ministry had come to an end. No more sermons on the mount; no more raising children from the dead; no more feeding the multitudes. Jesus' full focus would be toward that event for which He was born some thirty years earlier.*

*We will walk away from this lesson with a single truth in mind: the cross means everything. As this seed is planted deeply in our hearts, we will follow the outline below:*

- I. The Lord's Eternal Plan: His Cross (vv. 1-13)**
- II. The Lord's Explanatory Picture: His Communion (vv. 14-35)**
- III. The Lord's Excruciating Pleas: His Commitment (vv. 36-56)**
- IV. The Lord's Expected Punishment: His Condemnation (vv. 57-75)**

## I. The Lord's Eternal Plan: His Cross (vv. 1-13)

The focal point of all history is the cross. The central truth of the Bible is the cross. The motif in every message a preacher prepares is the cross. It was the great London pastor Charles Spurgeon who said that no matter where he preached from in Scripture he made "a beeline to the cross." The Apostle Paul said, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Let's observe the announcement of the cross (vv. 1-2). After Jesus "finished all these sayings" (v. 1), offering some hope to His disciples concerning the end times, He announced the appropriate setting to His disciples: "Ye know that after two days is the feast of the Passover" (v. 2). This annual Jewish festival was the most joyous celebration in Israel. They came together to commemorate the deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 12:21-28).

Each year, thousands of lambs were slain to recall the time when God's death angel "passed over" Hebrew homes where the lamb's blood had been applied to the doorposts as instructed. Unbeknown to the people of Jerusalem, this Passover was different: Jesus was God's own Passover Lamb (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:7; John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19-20).

As Jesus spoke, every word became more and more specific and applicable to Him: "the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified" (v. 2). The term "betrayed" means to deliver over into the custody of another. In fact, it is a very sad word, a word specifically referring to Judas Iscariot. In a real sense, Judas would pass over too: from a disciple of Jesus to a murderous betrayer of Jesus.

This betrayal, of course, was no surprise to our Lord. He knew the Cross lay ahead and the road leading there was paved with betrayal. He also knew Judas was the one.

A lesson we must all learn is this: we never plan an act or make a decision that God did not already know and allow. We have no hidden thoughts, no secrets from God. He knows. And the biggest mystery is He still loves us! So, Jesus announced both the purpose of the cross (Passover) and the tragedy of the Cross (betrayal).

### Reflection

#### Connection

*Is it possible to focus on the cross of Jesus too much? Why or why not?*

### Reflection

#### Connection

*How was it possible for Judas to remain "undercover from the other disciples? Explain.*



We should now observe the arrangements before the Cross (vv. 3-5). The participants involved in making arrangements for the Cross included the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, and even the high priest Caiaphas (v. 3). Caiaphas was son-in-law to Annas and was appointed by Rome. He served for over twenty years as high priest and built quite the reputation as a sly manipulator (cp. John 11:50). His most visible duty was to go once a year into the holy of holies.

They “assembled together” at the “palace” (v. 3); this was no doubt a top secret meeting since the palace was not the normal place for their assemblies. The plan they devised was risky but simple: “*That they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill him*” (v. 4). They needed a way to do this that would avoid a riot by the masses. The term “*subtilty*” basically means deceit; they were interested in baiting a trap for Jesus as if He were some wild animal.

Timing obviously needed to be considered. It could not be on “*the feast day*” because the crowd would not stand for it (v. 5). Think for a moment about these plans by the religious leaders. They are conspiring to commit murder! What devious power religious convictions can have over people! In the late 70’s, Jim Jones convinced over 900 people to take their lives, some of whom were moms giving poisonous Kool-Aid to their children. Religion is the most dangerous thing to a person’s spiritual health. I’m so glad Christianity is not a religion. Instead it is a relationship with Almighty God.

*The leaders  
were intending  
to kill; Jesus  
was intending  
to offer life.*

In stark contrast to the arrangements being deviously planned by the religious leaders, the anointing was being beautifully pictured by a lowly woman’s loving act (vv. 6-7). Another interesting contrast is Jesus’ location compared to the location of the religious leaders. While the leaders were meeting secretly in “official” religious headquarters, scheming to put Him to death, Jesus was visiting the humble home of a leper (v. 6). The leaders were intending to kill; Jesus was intending to offer life.

While in Simon’s house, “*there came unto Him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment*” (v. 7). John tells us this woman was Mary (John 12:3). She was even found at Jesus’ feet, for it is at Jesus’ feet that she found her blessings, a place to forfeit her burdens and offer her best.

The question must be asked: do you find yourself often at the feet of Jesus? Do you receive blessings there?

Mary brought with her an “*alabaster box of precious ointment.*” The box had a long, slim neck and a tiny pour spout so such expensive oil would not be wasted. The box held oil that was equal in value to an average man’s wage for a year!

Mary’s act of sacrifice cannot be overstated. Had pride driven her, she would have taken it to the Temple and dedicated it there for all to see her generosity. Instead, she took it to a known leper’s home, who had few friends to see. Also, it was customary to pour only a few drops when anointing a guest. Instead, Mary broke the neck of the box off and poured the entire contents on Jesus’ head. No



doubt, as the oil dripped from the vessel, her heart was being emptied as well, thrusting her entire life at Jesus' feet. What a picture this shows of someone truly in love with Jesus Christ. Does this picture similarly portray your love to Jesus?

Surprisingly, the disciples did not receive the act as Jesus did (vv. 8-9). They took it as a wasteful gesture: "For this ointment might have been sold for much and given to the poor" (v. 9). What sounded spiritual was, in essence, ignorance, and Jesus immediately corrected their hasty criticism (v. 10). Many people think money given to purely spiritual (as opposed to practical) causes is a waste. The only things they support are food and clothing ministries. The world thinks spending money for Jesus is a total washout. Here the disciples reflect the kingdoms of this world more than the Kingdom of God. The fact is, anything we do that we do not do for Jesus is a waste and can never possess results outside of time. Eternal benefit comes only from sacrificing for Jesus Christ.

### Reflection Connection

*Have you ever been mistaken about the nature of a gift given to the church? Without revealing any confidences, be prepared to share the circumstances with the group. Is money always the best gift to give? Why or why not?*

While His disciples attacked Mary, Jesus approved her (vv. 10-13). Mary's sacrifice possessed merit (vv. 10-11). Jesus called it a "good work." The sacrifice also possessed meaning (v. 12). She perceived his burial, not the disciples. Also, her sacrifice was a memorial (v. 13). Even when the Gospel would be preached in the future, people would be inspired by Mary's sacrificial act.

One never knows what Jesus makes of our expressions of love to Him. In heaven, they are all written down in a book. This inspires us to make every effort to do something—anything...everything—for Jesus.

## II. The Lord's Explanatory Picture: His Communion (vv. 14-35)

Jesus was with His disciples. He knew what was going on behind the scenes. His enemies' hearts are filled with hatred toward Him, yet He has nothing but love in His heart for them. The time came to gather around the most sacred table in all history. For over two thousand years, believers have continued to gather around this table in memory of the sacrifice it pictures.

Notice the setting of this moment (vv. 14-16). Matthew ties the rebuke Jesus gave to the disciples for subtly attacking Mary for her expression of love (vv. 10-13) to the time of the table, (v. 14) and we are informed about the price Judas received for the betrayal (vv. 14-15).

The disciples never expected that "one of the twelve" would be the betrayer. Judas Iscariot saw the same miracles, heard the same sermons, and received the same commission as did the other disciples. But while he may have been by the Lord's side, he was never on His side. There are always those who claim to love Jesus but claims are as far as they go.

Additionally, not only were the disciples shocked when they learned it was one of them, the priest must have been shocked as well. Imagine their surprise when Judas went "unto the chief priests" (v. 14). Here they were, stumped for a place to get to Jesus, when one of his own disciples offers to drop Him in their laps! Unfortunately, by our actions or words we often make it easier for Jesus' enemies to hurt His work.

"What will ye give me?" (v. 15) is a question which seems innocent enough. But

### Reflection Connection

*How often does your church observe the Lord's Supper? Is this more or less frequently than when you were growing up? If there is a significant change, please explain why you think it has changed.*



### Reflection Connection

*Is giving the highest form of sacrifice a person can accomplish for the Lord? Why or why not?*

it reveals the depths of human depravity and sin. First, Judas was interested in getting not giving. Contrast this with Jesus: *“the Son of man did not come to be ministered to, but to minister and give His life a ransom for many.”* Second, this question revealed the twisted sense of justice indicative of the small human heart. People want to give and serve, but only when it suits them. Judas was willing to see Jesus unjustly condemned if it filled his own pockets.

Third, this question reveals just how little sin settles for—*“thirty pieces of silver”* (v. 15). That amount would be worth less than twenty bucks, the price the law put on an ox-gored servant. The average slave was twenty dollars. For Judas, Jesus was worth twenty bucks. What is Jesus worth to you? (cp. Zechariah 11:2) After the bargain was struck, he *“sought opportunity to betray him”* (v. 16). Most of the time, we do not look for opportunities to betray Jesus; to the contrary, opportunities come looking for us. Satan sees to it. In fact, when we stray from Jesus, we are moving toward a time when we will sell Him out.

We have observed the setting; now, let’s notice the supper (vv. 17-29). Setting in motion the preparation of the meal, Jesus sent the disciples to make *“ready the Passover”* (vv. 17-19). Passover was commemorative of the night the death angel passed over the dwellings which followed Moses’ instructions about the slaughtered lamb (Exodus 12:1-28).

As the disciples sat down with Jesus that evening (v. 20), the first words from the Lord were like a bombshell: *“Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me”* (v. 21). No doubt, after several gasps for breath, stone-cold silence set in for what seemed an eternity but was only a few seconds. Then one after another they queried: *“Lord, is it I?”* (v. 22). Was it *“the disciple whom Jesus loved?”* (John 13:23). Or perhaps Peter, who often was a rock but more often a speak-before-he-thinks kind of guy? (17:5).

All of them were suspects. Whoever it was (they still did not know it was Judas). Jesus made it clear that the betrayer’s destiny would not be pleasant (vv. 23-24). Even Judas, knowing he was the one of whom Jesus spoke, asked *“Is it I?”* (v. 25). However, while the others called Jesus *“Lord”* (v. 22); Judas could only address Jesus as *“Master”* (v. 25). Master sounds innocent enough to us, but for Judas, it only meant the common title, *“Rabbi.”*

It is then that Jesus instituted what churches today celebrate as the Lord’s Supper (vv. 16-29). *“Take, eat; this is my body”* Jesus said (v. 26). Jesus spoke figuratively but based upon a literal death He soon faced, our obligation is to take and eat. Only Jesus is to give. This strikes the heart of the Christian faith—taking what God gives. He gave His Son who gave His life! Christianity at its most basic form is God giving. A person’s response at its irreducible core is receiving what God gives. Receiving is a sheer act of faith.

Afterward, the cup was passed and Jesus said: *“Drink ye all of it”* (v. 27). The representation is His blood. Jesus did not just have to die; He had to shed His blood (cp. 1 Peter 1:19). Life is in the shed blood of Jesus Christ and must be received.

As a sequel to the supper, the disciples sang a hymn (v. 30). Jewish worshippers were known to sing Psalms during Passover. Perhaps they sang Psalm 118. Jesus faced the cross but He paused to sing.

As they left the prepared place of Passover, the disciples may have seemed at ease. If so, their easiness did not last long for Jesus immediately spoke words that

### Reflection Connection

*Some people believe that if a person receives a gift from God, that person is “doing good works” and therefore God is not glorified in the transaction. What do you think? Please explain.*



once again stunned them: “All ye shall be offended because of me this night” (v. 31; cp. Zechariah 13:7). Peter insisted that even though the others would abandon Jesus, he could not be moved (v. 33). The same feeling must have returned that he felt when rebuking Jesus earlier (16:23). However, Jesus assured Peter that not only would he abandon Him, but deny he even knew Him (v. 34). By then the other disciples were lining up with Peter, ready to go to death for Jesus (v. 35). Their actions betrayed them. They could not even stay awake only a short time later (v. 40). We should never underestimate the power of the flesh, nor the infallible perception of Jesus.

### III. The Lord’s Excruciating Plea: His Commitment (vv. 36-56)

Much of what happened next is beyond the scope of human understanding. We are left to grope in mystery. First, we note the trauma (vv. 36-46). The sorrow that Jesus expresses causes us to shudder. After telling eight of His disciples to wait, He took Peter, James and John with Him a bit further into the olive garden (vv. 36-38). His soul was a whirlpool of sorrows. Every way He turned, he sensed the gush of God’s wrath on sin rolling toward Him like a gigantic tidal wave.

#### Reflection Connection

*If Jesus was doing the Father’s will, what was bearing so much on Jesus as he prayed in the garden? Explain.*

He went a “little further” and fell on His face and began to pray (v. 39). The only place He could turn was to His Father. His disciples would soon run away into the night and He would be left alone. No person who has ever experienced loneliness has ever experienced the vacuum Jesus felt. He knows our loneliness but we could never know His.

“If it be possible” was His cry. Was it possible? Of course! If God were interested in pure justice and Jesus withdrew His offer to die, then it was possible the cup could have passed from Him. We deserved to be punished for our sin, not the innocent Jesus in our place. In America, we punish the guilty and protect the innocent. That is the core of our justice system.

Of course, God was not interested in pure justice—at least for us. Instead He was interested in mercy. “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (v. 39). While it was possible the cup could pass, it would mean that every human being made in God’s image would have to drink it. Each person would bear God’s wrath against his own sin for all eternity. It is because of God’s magnificent love for us that Jesus drank the cup in our place. It was not at all possible for Jesus not to face the cross if we were to be saved.

Coming back, Jesus found the disciples fast asleep (vv. 40-41). He went back into the Gethsemane Garden a second time (v. 42) and even a third (v. 44) to continue to draw strength from above. Luke informs us an angel ministered to Him (Luke 22:43).

The trauma past, He returned to tell His disciples to “sleep on” (v. 45). It was then the treachery began. Judas led a band of soldiers to where Jesus was, and instructed the guards to note the one whom he greeted with a kiss (v. 48).

Jesus met Judas with words that ring in Judas’ ear as he recalls them even in hell: “Friend, wherefore art thou come?” (v. 50) No one who betrays Jesus or denies Him to be Lord and Savior of his life will escape the haunting memories of the moments Christ was available but rejected.

As the soldiers led Jesus away, Peter attempted to make good on his word not

#### Reflection Connection

*How could justice be served by the unjust act of an innocent person dying in place of the guilty? Was God harsh to turn His back on Jesus in the garden? Why or why not?*



to abandon Jesus (v. 51). Jesus knew Peter was a fisherman, not a trained fighter. The disciples would only lie in their own blood if they fought. Besides, Jesus needed no sword to protect Himself (v. 53). His Kingdom was not based upon military. His was a spiritual Kingdom (John 18:36). The disciples gathered their belongings and disappeared into the night (v. 56).

Jesus committed Himself to the guards who later led him to his crucifixion. Yet the Son of God had already given His life. He knew He had to die. That's why He came to live (cp. 1:21).

#### **IV. The Lord's Expected Punishment: His Condemnation (vv. 57-75)**

This last portion of Matthew 26 deals specifically with the trials of Jesus (vv. 57-68). Jesus' condemnation before the courts was no surprise. He expected the punishment. He prepared Himself for such in the garden (vv. 39-46).

As the scene opens, we find Jesus being arraigned before Caiaphas (vv. 57-68). The Sanhedrin was hastily assembled. Normally, seventy men assembled before the high priest but not this hour. There were probably significantly fewer. Everything about this trial was bogus. Trials were not held at night.

And, the defendant should have been permitted to have witnesses. Witnesses against the defendant must be eye-witnesses, and a death sentence could not be given until three days had passed. Where were the lepers, whom Jesus healed? Where was Lazarus to testify? Or the widow whose son was raised? The arraignment was more like a hanging meeting.

As they questioned Jesus, He "held His peace" (v. 63). Then Caiaphas said the magic words: "I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God" (v. 63). Jesus could not violate Scripture. His answer clearly and emphatically states His deity (v. 64).

In fact, the words He spoke were so clear Caiaphas "rent his clothes" insisting blasphemy had been committed (v. 65). The sentence was passed. Jesus would die (v. 66).

Immediately they began to abuse Him (vv. 67-68) which was another mocking of their laws. Abuse of a prisoner was considered both immoral as well as illegal.

Matthew takes us to Peter as he waited outside the palace (vv. 69-75). Evidently, Peter still thought he was a better man than the other disciples, who had deserted Jesus. What we find is a confused fisherman, scared to death that people will associate him with Jesus. He denied he knew Jesus once (vv. 69-70), then again (vv. 71-72) and a third time (vv. 73-75).

Three opportunities to speak up for Jesus, and three opportunities dismissed. In fact, he even began to curse and swear, and acted the role of one who had never known Jesus (vv. 74-75). "Immediately the cock crowed" wrote Matthew (v. 74). Upon that, Peter recalled Jesus' words and ran into the night, weeping aloud (v. 75). It is so easy to think we are stronger than we are. We should never presume and flirt with temptation.

*It is so easy to think we are stronger than we are.*



### Golden Greek Nugget

Jesus questions His disciples in their treatment of Mary, who brought a box of perfume to anoint Jesus (v. 10). The term translated “trouble” literally means “to cut.” The disciples were evidently exceptionally stern with the woman. It seems a flaw in our sinful human nature is to torture others who act in a way we do not understand. Jesus received her and her kind act as a “good work” toward Him.

### Wrap Up

*Matthew chapter 26 offers one scene after another, insisting that the cross means everything. It was God's plan alone (vv. 1-13). No one thought this up. The idea of the cross came from heaven. And His plan was pictured in the Passover, which believers celebrate now in the Lord's Supper (vv. 14-35).*

*His sacrifice is never to be taken lightly. The excruciating experience Jesus had in Gethsemane revealed the pain of the cross and His commitment to it (vv. 36-56). Finally, the expected condemnation arrived (vv. 57-75). All of this, my friend, was done on your behalf and mine. Will you turn to Him for forgiveness of sin and a new life? Will you receive a fresh beginning?*

