

Pre-communion

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, can we open our Bibles again, please, in John chapter 12, reading again at verse 3. Then Mary took about half a liter of pure nard and expensive perfume.
- She poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. You know, people talk about things that are epoch-making.
- In other words, these are events or these are dates, and we know that when something happens, the world will never be the same again. Sometimes we're not really aware of that when they happen.
- I remember when television first came to the island of Skye. It was just one of those things, and yet it changed the whole culture of the island forever.
- I don't know, some of you will remember where you were in 1962, I think, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated.
- [1 : 1 8] Most of you were not on the planet then, November 63. But those of you who remember exactly where you were when we were clearing out the house recently for flitting, there is only one set of newspapers that I have kept, and that is the newspapers of 9-11.
- I've got the times for the day after and the day after that. Because I knew that when the plane hit the towers, that the world would never be the same again.
- It was a week that changed the world. But I suppose that if we went through the streets of Aberdeen tonight, no one would ever mention the week that we are dealing with tonight as being epoch-making and as having been world-changing.
- But the week of the crucifixion was almost certainly the most important and most significant week in the history of the world.
- Do you know that one-half of John's gospel deals with it? Two-fifths of Mark's gospel deals with it. A third of Matthew's gospel deals with this particular week in the whole history of the world.
- [2 : 3 6] And however old the world is, whatever your view upon that is, certainly of all the years there is nothing as significant as this particular week.
- And so we're coming here to a week as it's recorded in John's gospel. Now I don't know about you, but for so many people John is their favorite gospel.
- I think of an old hymn, you know, Murray McShane's hymn. He speaks of Isaiah's wild measure and John's simple page.
- It is very simple. The Greek in it is very simple, it's very easily understood. And yet John's gospel is the most paradoxical of all the gospels because there's a double meaning and there's hidden things in every single verse, certainly every single chapter.
- So we're talking here about this epoch-making week located in this incredible gospel. Now why was John's gospel written? Well, again, we know from John's gospel why it was written.
- [3 : 4 9] It says that these things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in him, you may have life in his name.

Isn't that a tremendous evangelistic tract? That in people reading John's gospel, that in believing in him, that they will have life in his name.

And so then we're coming to this particular passage, talking about this particular week. Now in the week, there is one particular event which far outshines every other.

Now recently we've had a lot of high-profile celebrity deaths. David Bowie and Ronnie Corbett and Prince and all these folk, and folk are talking about these celebrity deaths.

But, you know, here's my prediction. In ten years' time, nobody will have heard of Prince.

[4 : 59] It could be raining purple rain, and nobody will even give him a second thought. Ronnie Corbett will disappear into the midst of times, just like Harry Lauder.

Harry who, you say? Exactly. It proves my point. The stars of one day are put into the sea of forgetfulness the next.

But someone has written about this death. One thing this person says, one thing can be said of certainty about the crucifixion of Christ. It was manifestly the most famous death in history.

No other death has aroused one hundredth part of the interest or been remembered with one hundredth part of the intensity and concern.

Isn't it true that there is no other death in the history of the humanities that has the same significance or is known about, is spoken about, as much as the death of the Lord Jesus Christ?

[6 : 06] And isn't it indicative of the counter-cultural nature of the gospel? That it's a death that brings life. That it's speaking of someone's death that actually brings us joy and brings us hope.

And it's carrying about on our being a little cross, the emblem of death that gives us a passion to tell the world that there is hope.

And so we're having here this passage here and it's just at the beginning of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. And what I'm going to do is I'm going to look at this passage 1 to 11 and the passage here about Mary and Lazarus and all these things.

And I'm going to mention, we're going to notice from passage three things which happen to us if we follow Jesus. So these are three points. Imagine we've got an imaginary PowerPoint up there and it's appearing on the screen before you.

So point one is, if you follow Jesus, death is never far away. See on the screen there? If you follow Jesus, death is never far away.

[7 : 23] Now the interesting thing is, when I say that death is never far away, I mean death in two contexts.

Number one, or A, we've got his death, the death of Jesus. Look at verse one. Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany.

Now remember, this is John speaking. So there are, one commentator says, over 200 double meanings in John. That's very arbitrary. I think there's maybe even more than that.

So the Passover was the event that dominated the week. Just as in our culture, Christmas dominates the last week of December.

And it's all they think about. And if you're a child, it's all you think about for the month before then. So Passover was like Christmas to the people. It was a big day.

[8 : 23] It was a big day. It was the families came together and it was a time of great celebration. Now we read there, that if you follow Jesus, death is never far away.

His death. When the children of Israel, you know the story, the story was, they were to kill a sacrifice and they were to smear the blood of the animal on the lintel of the door.

And when the angel of death saw the blood, he would pass over and he would not destroy these people. It's a story which is embedded into our consciousness.

How much more was it embedded into the consciousness of the Jewish people of generations ago? And so you're seeing there this image of blood.

Death was averted. There was liberation. There was salvation. There was freedom as long as they were under the blood. Now again, in our own generation, this is something, again, I hope I'm not becoming a grumpy old man, but we're not hearing as much in contemporary evangelicalism about the blood.

[9 : 37] It's almost as if there's a shame about the blood. We want to have a more hygienic Christianity. And yet we think of these old classic hymns, Would You Be Free From Your Burden of Sin?

There's power in the blood. Power in the blood. Our fathers, our forefathers, sang with great gusto these hymns about the blood.

The old folk used to pray, pleading the blood of Jesus, cleanses from the blood of Christ. And now there is within us some kind of, I don't know, strange antipathy to the blood.

It's so messy. It's so unclean. And if you want to be cool, you certainly don't talk about being cleansed by the blood. It's a paradox.

It's horrific. And yet, if we lose the blood, if we lose the significance of the blood, if we, you know, sanitize our face so much that we have a Christ without blood, then we have no salvation.

[10 : 46] The Bible says, without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin. And so that's why we're saying if you follow Jesus, death is never far away.

And primarily, it is his death. It's at the very heart of our faith. There is indeed power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb.

That's not the quaint language of Victoriana. That's the language of sacrifice, which is at the very heart of the gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In fact, the Bible tells us, 1 Corinthians 5, 8, Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed. And remember, John himself had quoted John the Baptist, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And so, death is there. Death is looming before us. The Christian faith is born out of this atmosphere of death, out of this atmosphere of blood.

[12 : 00] So, that verse, six days before the Passover. Now, that must have been something for the Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine as he was growing up as a little Jewish boy, knowing that not only was the Passover about him, but every single sacrifice was about him.

He knew that. He wasn't ignorant of that fact. It was part of his suffering. I don't know how you feel about doctors and nurses giving you injections.

Personally, I'm okay as long as I don't see the needle. If I see the needle, I'm down. I just don't want to see the needle. Never seen a needle going into me in my life.

But imagine, for those of you who like me, watch the needle going right in. It's not a pleasant sight. Knowledge of the timing, knowledge of the point of pain exacerbates the pain.

Jesus knew the pain. Not only did he know the pain, he knew the consequences of the pain. His life's history was written in the Old Testament.

[13 : 14] I often wonder about Prince William and Prince Harry. At what time in their lives did they realize that they were somewhat different to all the other kids?

You can imagine Harry saying, Wills, have you noticed something? What was that? Have you noticed that Granny's picture is in all the stamps?

Have you noticed that Granny's picture is in all the money? Are we different to everybody else? You know, what is it about us?

As they, when in their consciousness did they realize? And so the Lord Jesus Christ, almost in the inverse of that, growing up with this awesome knowledge that he was going to die, that he was going to die as a sacrifice, that the blood of every sacrifice pointed to his blood.

At the heart of our faith is substitutionary atonement, one who did not know sin but was made sin for us. If you're into theology, a lot of folk are into a model called Christus Victor.

[14 : 35] Christ is the victor over sin. Yes, that's a great model, Christ is the victor over sin, but Christ became the substitute, first of all.

And so here we find that the blood revealed the holiness of God. So, point 1A, if you like, up in our PowerPoint, if you follow Jesus, death is never far away, A, his death.

If you follow Jesus, death is never far away, be our death also. Because in this passage, you see the death of Jesus in the Passover, you see the death of Jesus there in verse 7 that Mary intended it for his burial, you see the death of Jesus everywhere in the passage, death is there for him.

But death is also there for his people. You see that in many places in the passage. You've got verses 4 and 5.

One of his disciples, Jesus Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?

[15 : 51] Now, we find there that Mary is doing something incredibly beautiful, and yet she experiences here a death to her personality. She is criticized.

So a trailer for a TV program, it looked an interesting program, but it wasn't a trailer, it was a bit of a I walked into a room and there was this program on, and there was this older lady, lovely looking lady in her early 60s, very well presented, she's going to do something, and her son says to her, you're not wearing that, it does you no favors.

She's a great actress, because you just saw her wounded, you saw her sense of worth just been taken away, you're not wearing that, it does you no favors at all.

Gentlemen, here's a little side application, don't ever use that line, you learn nothing else tonight, don't use that line. It's a similar thing here when Judas is criticizing Mary, he begins to kill her personality, there's death there to her joy, death to her sensibilities, she's wanting to do something beautiful for Jesus, she's wanting to do a generous thing, and Judas cuts her away, why are you wasting your money, it could be given to the poor.

Haven't we experienced that maybe in our own lives, a little death to our ambition, maybe we're doing something for Jesus, maybe we're wanting to give some money to the church, maybe it's a spouse, maybe it's a sibling, maybe it's a friend saying, why are you wasting your money on that lot, the church has got plenty of money, money, why are you wasting time in these books, you're a young Christian, you become a Christian when you're young, and folk will say, why are you wasting your life, really good friend of mine graduated many years ago, he was an adopted son, he was an only son of very proud parents who had invested a lot in him, they'd invested a lot financially and emotionally, he went to great school, went to Cambridge, did law, got a first career in one of the big city law firms in London, and was called into ministry, and I remember him saying, his parents saying to him who weren't believers, what a waste, what a waste of your education, what a waste of so much opportunity, doesn't that, isn't that a form of death, maybe some of you have heard that in your own

[18 : 56] Christian life, you're doing something about Jesus and someone says, what a waste, you could have been doing so much more, that's what Judas is saying there in verse 4, in verse 5, in verse 6, so each time the message is always in wasting money, wasting time, wasting your life, each time that knife goes in, you know a little bit about what Jesus meant when he says, taking up the cross.

I was reading about Canon Andrew White, he was a minister of one of the most famous churches in the world, St. George's, Anglican Church in Baghdad.

One of his last baptisms there in Baghdad, he baptized 13 people within one week, 11 out of those 13 were killed.

And at baptism, he asked all the folk a question, he says, do you really want to go through with this? Because if you want to go through with this, this will mean your life.

When had a theological seminary in France, 90% of the folk going out from that seminary died within a year of going out with the gospel.

[20 : 26] You see, that's what the point is. Remember, if you follow Jesus, death is never far away. It could be death to your emotions, it could be death to your personhood, death for yourself in some way, literally.

And we see again in verse 9 and verse 10, the chief priest made plans to kill Lazarus as well. For an account of him, many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believe, poor Lazarus, he'd been killed already, or he died already, they were going to kill him again.

The world wanted to kill him. Isn't it bizarre how the world has a culture of death and how the Christian faith has a culture of life?

At the beginning of life, the world want to cut out folk through abortion at the end of life. Folk want to cut folk out through euthanasia as a culture of death.

And yet the gospel presents a culture of life. It's a movement that gives quality and life, and yet the world here and its oppression is bringing in this culture of death.

[21 : 45] Many of you here are not so dramatic, but you've come back from death. You've been converted, you've been made new, you've been born again.

And that's why, yes, death is never far away, but the paradox is that there is life beyond that. Because you've been loved with an everlasting love.

Like the old song, love changes everything. But we find here that people want to kill your spirit if that were possible. And so we're seeing there point one, if you follow Jesus, death is never far away.

A, his death. death be also for us our death. Death perhaps to our ambitions, death to many things which we held dearly.

So, if you follow Jesus, death is never far away. Number two in the paragraph, if you follow Jesus, you will find a passion you didn't know you had.

[22 : 49] Death is never far away. you will find a passion you didn't know you had. Now, we see in this obvious situation, verse three, then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume, she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.

And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Passion, an emotional attraction. Now, folk express emotion and passion in different ways.

I happened to watch one of the Falkirk players last night after their victory and in true Scottish fashion he says, I'm absolutely buzzing tonight.

And that was probably as passionate as a doer old Scot's going to get. our African friends who are really passionate, they know what it is, our Latin friends know what passion is all about, they must find us so bland.

And here we see that there is this, Mary does something extraordinary. She took half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume that cost a year, I don't know what the average national wage is in Scotland, I think it's around 25, 26k.

[24 : 23] Now imagine you've got a bottle of perfume and it's worth that. You could put it on eBay and you could get a lot of money for it because it's really very, very special.

So it's a family heirloom, it means a lot emotionally, it means a lot financially, it is very, very expensive. And she could have got significant money for it.

But this is the nearest thing to crazy that she's ever been. She just takes it and she smashes it and she anoints her hair and in she anoints Jesus.

That's what loose women do. Would the people in the room have misunderstood that? Absolutely. But it was something so unusual. It showed the devotion and love.

She knew that Jesus was about to die. It says there, doesn't it? Jesus says it was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.

[25 : 28] She does something that's over the top. She says, I know you're about to die. I want to be identified with you. Folk, are we measured in our love for Jesus?

Or is there this passion that if you will find a passion that you didn't know you had? A passion for the Savior. He seems to do this.

He seems to draw out of us that we do these extraordinary out-of-the-box things for him. Folk, will you do some extraordinary out-of-the-box thing for him?

Not because you're commanded, but because it's spontaneous and serendipitous. It's just something that comes in and you just do it for Christ. You say something that's totally out there.

You do something that your normal state, conservative self would say, what are you doing? The vestry before David says, well, the service will be as normal.

[26 : 37] I say, let's do a praise conga. Don't worry, I'm not even going to go there. And I'm not being too flippant, I hope, but are we so buttoned up?

I'm not going to go there. But are we so buttoned up that even the idea of doing anything out of the ordinary?

And yet this woman did something that was jaw-droppingly passionate.

let's undo our Scottish reserve and put on a passion for Jesus.

Will we give up our ordinary ambitions for an extraordinary ambition? Will we release our lives in devotion to him?

[27 : 43] Now, see what we do for our passions. Folk who get passions for cars, for sport, for academia, for the arts.

People do extraordinary things for that all the time. Social entrepreneurs, philanthropists, I was reading Warren Buffett, does amazing things.

with his money. Just incredible things. Mary had a cause, and it was a cause that was worth giving up everything for.

She had a cause not just worth dying for, but she had a cause worth living for. At this point, Mary was the only person in the room, this woman was the only person in the room who understood.

Was it because women are emotionally more intelligent than men? Some say is a self-evident fact. Was that the case? Was it simply a case of acute emotional intelligence?

[28 : 55] I think we have a key in that every time we read of Mary here, Mary of Bethany, she was always at the feet of Jesus. That's why she knew she had heard him teach, she had heard him talking about her death and she listened, she knew the trajectory in which he was going.

John 11, 32, you know Martha's busy, Mary's at the feet of Jesus. Where is she again? She's at the feet of Jesus. Sitting at the feet of Jesus is a Hebrew idiom for that's where she learned, always learning, at Jesus.

And yet she broke her most treasured possession. What's our most treasured possession? What are our plans for our lives?

Are they driven by a passion like this? The smell of the ointment filled the whole house. This is a metaphor, I think, because what she did was a blessing to Jesus and it was a blessing to others.

Time's moving on. If you follow Jesus, death is never far away. If you follow Jesus, you'll discover a passion you didn't know you had. And thirdly, if you follow Jesus, you will find an advocate who sticks closer than any brother.

[30 : 20] If you follow Jesus, you will find an advocate who sticks closer than any brother. My favorite verse in this passage, don't know who yours is, my favorite verse is verse 7, where Jesus says, leave her alone.

Leave her alone. Now, in this passage, we see a contrast, don't we? Mary is a real contrast to Judas and the high priests. Judas knew the cost of everything.

It was worth a year's wages, and yet he knew the value of nothing. The perfume cost 90 pieces of silver, 50 more than Jesus got for betraying Jesus, the kindest, most perfect man who ever lived.

Judas sold Christ for 30 pieces of silver, Mary exalted Jesus for 90 pieces of silver. Mary gave Jesus an offering worth two and a half that of Judas.

Judas kept the bag of money, Mary broke the bottle of perfume. The first words that Judas used were words of biting criticism. The first words of Mary were words of devoted trust.

[31 : 40] Judas wanted to turn the attention away from Jesus. Mary wanted to turn the attention to Jesus. The contrasts in this passage are really quite remarkable, aren't they?

And here we find that she's burst this ointment, Judas is getting onto her and you can imagine all the people around her and they're really, really being horrible.

And Jesus says these words, leave her alone. Now, this is a man's world. This is a world which is the power is in the hands of the rich. It has always been so.

Power is in the hands of men. And so you've got these men saying to Mary, you're just useless, you're crazy.

This is how I'm saying if you follow Jesus, you will find an advocate who sticks closer than any brother. Leave her alone. Lovely, lovely words.

[32 : 43] Jesus is drawn towards the weak and the vulnerable. Jesus is drawn towards those who are dispossessed, those who do not have a voice themselves.

And when we are at the great bar and even Satan accuses us and Satan says, how dare you call yourself a Christian? The Lord Jesus says, leave him.

Leave her alone. I have died for them. They are with me. They are mine. They simply don't see they're the problem, not Mary.

This is exact parallel of the passage. where Jesus is with the woman taken in adultery. And the high priestess and hedron are about to cast stones and Jesus says the same words, leave her alone.

You who are without sin cast the first stone. And so you see also that the priorities of Jesus are unusual. The priorities of Jesus are very different to that of the world.

[33 : 50] Now, no one can accuse Jesus and the Christian faith about being against poor relief. Wherever you have the gospel, you've got social justice.

They go together like a horse and carriage. Christianity and social justice. We get taken up with the politics of the right, but we often forget the politics of the left.

There is no right or left. It's okay campaigning about named persons and all that stuff which is perceived to be on the right, whereas folk are often silent within conservative evangelism, anyway, about social justice.

And yet Jesus here has a heart for the poor, and yet in that, see the priority. See the priority. He says here there are some occasions, resources that you think are used in a way that you think is wasteful, or not necessarily wasteful.

You get the same thing today. Folk will say you spend all that money in a church, you're going to do a building program that's going to cost nearly two million pounds.

[35 : 08] What a waste. It could all have been given away to the poor. It's the same argument, isn't it? And it sounds incredibly plausible.

It's exactly the same thing here. As if there is no value in a place of worship. As if there is no value in a place that's going to be opened in dwellings of the righteous, who has heard the melody of joy and peace.

People of a past generation thought nothing of building here was erected, not, I hope, for the vanity of men, but for the glory of God. And people then would have said, what a waste.

There are some things even more important than social justice. And we find here that the death of Jesus and the implications of that, the worship of the Savior, is important.

one of the main arrows of the devil is the accusation of unworthiness. And they were saying to Mary, you're doing an unworthy thing here, you're being wasteful.

[36 : 20] And the devil accuses, accuses, yes, if you follow Jesus, you will find an advocate who sticks closer than any brother. Jesus is with us.

I close. Are you someone who needs an advocate tonight? Are you someone whose conscience has been slain by the devil?

He keeps saying you're not worthy. He's saying you're a poor specimen of a believer. You're just a poor soul. You're just someone who's an apology for a believer. You're someone who's got a disgrace sitting at the Lord's table tomorrow.

How dare you come? Who are you? Think of all the sins that you have committed this week. Think of all the priorities that you get wrong. And we hear the maelstrom of accusations and in the midst of that raining down of accusations we hear a commanding voice leave them alone.

And Satan tempts me to despair. He tells me of a guilt within. Upward I look and see him there who made an end of all my sin.

[37 : 35] Because the sinful savior died my sinful soul is counted free for God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

We have the resounding words of the gospel. And Jesus says leave them alone.

Let's pray. Father we thank you for your word. Again we praise you for its clarity this evening. Thank you for what we have learned there.

The dark sided if we follow Jesus death is never far away but we bless you that his death meant life for us. If we follow Jesus we will we didn't know we had Lord rekindle that passion in our own lives.

And if you follow Jesus you will find an advocate who sticks closer than any brother. May that advocate be our advocate in a felt sense this evening.

[38 : 47] Forgive us now our many sins. We ask this in the Savior's name. Amen.