

John 11:45-12:10 What we have before us this evening/morning is a passage filled with emotion. The structure that frames that emotion begins and ends with two bookends of new faith on either side of two contrasting pathways.

The first path is one of evil, angry, self-driven logic represented by the highest most influential religious leaders of Israel. They believe in the world of the flesh, the material world: a world of self, ambition and pride. Through the centuries there have lived nameless, unremembered thousands of wealthy, intellectual giants, powerful leaders, leaders like the nameless Pharisees in Chapter 11. ***The Pathway of the Twisted Heart.***

The opposing path is shown to us by Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha. Here is the path of true greatness, ***The Pathway of the Pure in Heart.*** As Jesus says in Matthew 26:13, *“Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world what she has done will also be told in memory of her.”* Mary is a woman who speaks few words in scripture but one who has influenced millions, a woman whose name has been honored and remembered for over two thousand years.

The First Bookend

Here is the first bookend of new found FAITH. We begin at verse 45.

45 *“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him,”* Why??? What just happened? When Mary came out to meet the Master, Jesus asked her, *“Where have you laid him?”* What follows is a procession. Jesus, Mary, and Martha walk a dusty path to the family gravesite and a crowd follows them; mourners, some from the village of Bethany, some family, business associates and friends from Jerusalem. Curious, grieving, most know this is the Teacher that Mary and Martha admire. Certainly news of him had spread over the past three years. Some may have already heard him speak, seen him heal. It is these people who see the impossible with their own eyes. After four days dead in a tomb, Lazarus, wrapped in burial linen, steps out on Jesus’ command. For some, what they see changes their lives forever. They see and believe!

Verse 46, *“but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.”* There was no middle ground. For Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead was like an enormous boulder flung into a stream, *“a rock of offense”* as Peter calls Jesus in 1 Peter 2:8. People either believe or violently reject. Jesus leaves no other choice. He doesn’t intend to. Unfortunately, without the work of the Spirit, without an open heart, seeing is not believing. Many shut their eyes and refuse to be convinced. For the Pharisees, too much is at stake; authority, power, prestige, money, position. Believing in the truth of Jesus threatens all that is dear, all that their hearts’ desire. His influence among the people is too strong and growing. But the Pharisees, on their own, don’t have the power to solve this “Jesus problem.”

Clearly, we must admit that seeing miracles alone does not have the power to convert men’s souls and make them believe in Christ. J.C. Ryle calls that idea a delusion. As Ryle puts it, “To fancy, as some do, that if they saw something wonderful done before their eyes in confirmation of the Gospel, they would at once cast off all indecision and serve Christ, is a mere idle dream. It is the grace of the Spirit in our hearts, and not miracles, that our souls require.” Without the Spirit our hearts remain hard as stone. Unbelief is the default position of our hearts. We must never be surprised if we see blatant unbelief in our own times and around our own homes. Nothing can melt unbelief but the grace of God and work of the Spirit. So the Pharisees in Jerusalem join with the chief priests and scribes to devise a permanent solution.

The Pathway of the Twisted Heart

Verse 47 *“the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council (or Sanhedrin) and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”* The Sanhedrin was a judicial, legislative and executive body made up of 70 men, dominated by priests with an influential group of Pharisees and wealthy aristocrats. The Sanhedrin was like a combination of the Congress, President and Judicial branches of our government without the real power which was held by Rome. The Sanhedrin did the internal, day to day, messy political work of ruling the nation as long as it could hold the people in subjugation to Rome. Maintaining the status quo for their Roman masters was their job. Jesus threatened the fragile stability of their pseudo rule.

So it is time for the Sanhedrin to act. How desperately wicked is the self driven heart of man. No one denied that the miracle was real, but unfortunately the truth was too inconvenient. Clearly Lazarus was dead for four days and now alive. And Jesus was the one who had performed the miracle. As it says in verse 47, *“this man performs many signs.”* They were saying, *“This man does many miracles.”* The fact was undeniable; and yet the chief priests and Pharisees could not believe that the man who does these miracles is also the Messiah. They had seen him, seen his signs, heard him speak, investigated, coerced, threatened witnesses, cast common people from the synagogue, debated and cajoled, argued, and tried unsuccessfully to entrap Jesus and his followers for nearly three years. The signs just keep on coming; more powerful, convincing and, well, God-like. And Lazarus’ resurrection is by far the worst: seen by a host of people and so close to Jerusalem. Enough is enough. So *“what are we to do?”*

John clearly uses inside information to give us a detailed account of what took place at that important Sanhedrin Council. His source could have been Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea.

This part of our passage paints a clear picture of Caiaphas. Both John and Matthew mention Caiaphas, the high priest who leads the Sanhedrin. Caiaphas is clearly not a diplomatic leader. *“You know nothing at all,”* he scoffs at the members of the Council in verse 49 as they wring their hands at the moral quandary they face. The high priest cuts off their debate about what to do. In his mind there is only one logical course of action. *“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.”* As Milne says, *“Jesus is to be offered up for the saving of Israel, one man for the nation. That is nothing less than the truth. And not just for Israel, for he will die as the sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world, saving and uniting the people of God among all nations.”* God’s promise to Abraham **will** be accomplished. This wicked Council **will** be part of the Avenue of Grace.

John whispers a little aside to his readers in verse 51 that Caiaphas *“did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”* So he is not only the high priest but a prophet. What he fears and plots to avoid will still come to pass. Caiaphas rushes head long in blind ignorance, convincing the Council to eliminate Jesus. By doing so he sets in place events that will accomplish his own prophecy. In less than forty years the very thing they dread happens - Roman armies come, destroy Jerusalem, obliterate the temple and carry away the whole nation into captivity. This Council agrees to the crucifixion of Jesus. His conviction is assured before the trial happens.

Truly the words of the second Psalm are constantly being verified in this tired old world. *“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord. He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.”* Psalm 2:2,4 God can make

the evil plans of his enemies work for the good of his children and cause the wrath of man to praise his name. The very things that at one time seem likely to hurt me and those I love, prove in the end to be for my gain and theirs. What appears to be a tsunami of pain, turns into a forest of bright green leaves and the approach of spring in God's time. *I have to remember this! In days of personal trouble, chaos, war and folly, believers may rest patiently in the Lord.*

So ends a picture of one pathway depicted by John in our passage, **The Pathway of the Twisted Heart**. Leaders of the Council set their plot in motion. A brief transition follows.

53 "So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. 54 Jesus therefore 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."

Not surprisingly, Jesus finds out about the Sanhedrin's decision and decides to move out of range about twelve miles north of Jerusalem to the town of Ephraim, far enough to be safe for the moment but close enough to walk up to Jerusalem for the third and final Passover when the time is right. His hour is fast approaching, determined not by anxious religious leaders but by his Father.

Verses 55-57. Meanwhile Jerusalem is mobbed as masses of pilgrims arrive daily from the surrounding countryside. Some make the pilgrimage from far away countries, a part of the diaspora. They come to be purified; a required ritual cleansing of the home and bathing in a Mikveh, before Passover. John gives us a clear snapshot of groups gathered in the temple courts where Jesus often taught, hoping he'll show up, anxious for the latest news. Hoping for a show or a Messiah? Even here belief and unbelief clash. People whisper, speculating in curious groups. "Have you heard? The Council will arrest him. They are set against him. Will he come for the Passover feast?" "It's too dangerous."

The Pathway of the Pure in Heart

What follows is the second path, The Pure in Heart, illustrated by Lazarus' sister, Mary. Chapter 12:1-11

1 "Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. 3 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. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" 6 He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. 8 For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

In my comments for this section, I draw heavily from Bruce Milne's commentary. John sketches a compelling picture similar to Mark's and Matthew's accounts of the same incident. Let's fill in John's drawing a bit with background and nuance, then apply this beautiful story of Mary to our lives as we each seek to express our own love for Jesus.

Tension is building. Jesus leaves his retreat in Ephraim and begins the final march toward Jerusalem. He pauses briefly at Bethany. Someone thoughtfully gives a feast in his honor. Martha is preparing food, bustling around, serving, of course. Guests are reclining on pillows around the low table, Greek style. Lazarus is present, a vivid reminder of what recently took place, a reminder of Jesus' fearsome power and authority. There is a sense of celebration as funeral gives way to feast, death to life, yet completely unlike the wedding celebration in Cana

nearly three years earlier when Jesus transformed water into wine. Now everything has taken on a new meaning. Each one of his followers has profoundly changed. They know the beginning of this walk. But with Jesus everything is different now; murky, dark. A heaviness and uncertainty hang in the air. Jesus speaks of death and burial. Everyone is aware of danger ahead in Jerusalem.

Mary approaches Jesus from behind as he reclines, his head close to the low table where the food was laid. In an act of extravagant, moving, humble devotion she approaches Jesus. Breaking open a bottle of **very** expensive perfume, Mary anoints his feet. Nard is oil-like perfume extracted from the root and spike of the nard plant, grown at the foot of the Himalayan mountains in India; not one of your low quality brands from the Bethany supermarket!

Matthew and Mark appear to be describing the very same incident as what we read here in John. The only difference seems to be the part of Jesus' body that Mary anoints. John speaks specifically of the feet while Matthew and Mark refer to the head of Jesus. DA Carson points out that the amount of nard used was very large (a pound), easily enough to anoint Jesus' entire body. It's interesting to note that in Matthew and Mark's accounts, Jesus refers to Mary anointing his 'body' for burial.

Mary uses her hair to wipe Jesus' feet. A woman unbinding her hair in public was regarded as socially immodest, scandalous. Mary is so moved by deepest feelings of devotion that she ignores the disapproval. Immediately, the whole house floods with the rich fragrance of what Mary has done, powerfully enveloping the entire gathering in the sensory experience.

Not everyone is pleased. The money for this expensive perfume could have been given to the poor. John points to Judas as the ringleader who is outraged at the expense. John shares his insight that Judas is the type of man who has money on his mind all the time and speaks of Judas as the one who would later betray Jesus. As treasurer, Judas was in the habit of betraying Jesus' trust by helping himself to ministry funds. Betrayal was a habit. Greed already dominated his soul, not concern for the poor.

Mary recognizes the all-consuming cost of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. How much she fully understood, we will never know. But certainly it's gratitude that drives her display of devotion. Gratitude and trust in what he intends. Gratitude for bringing her brother back from death. Gratitude fills us too, for Jesus' journey to Jerusalem to offer himself for despairing, lost sinners, gratitude for the free gift of salvation, a place in God's family. This is scandalous grace. "Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to the cross I cling." We who are saved by his grace become his debtors. Devotion to Jesus and gratitude for his sacrifice will lead to service of the poor far greater than the extravagant cost of one jar of perfume. Gratitude will be the fragrance of the gospel that fills the world.

A Model for Service

Jesus defends Mary. In Matthew 26:10 Jesus speaks of this moment to his disciples, "*Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me.*" This beautiful action of Mary's represents a model for **our service to Jesus** in five ways.

First, it is the fruit of a **humble spirit** kneeling in the posture of subservience. Mary is mentioned three times in the gospels and always in association with Jesus' feet, **listening** to his teaching in Luke 10, **falling at his feet** in grief in John 11. Now **anointing Jesus' feet** to express her devotion. In one more week, at the Last Supper, Jesus himself will kneel as a servant to wash the feet of his apostles and command them to do likewise. True service for Jesus springs from a whole-hearted commitment to him as Lord. It's at the feet of Jesus that our service for him begins.

Second, Mary shows a **willing, perceptive heart**. She knows him so well, feels his mood, recognizes the sorrow. While the disciples struggle to interpret his words, fill with foreboding or ignore his warnings of the suffering to come. Mary, so firmly practiced at setting aside her self and listening to his voice: knows the path he's walking, accepts, honors, adores, and silently sits with him. She hears and understands. Now Mary humbly prepares Jesus for the suffering to come. Her gift mimics the scandalous grace of the Lord she honors. Like Mary, we also need a perceptive, calm spirit: slow to speak, quick to listen, able to discern the voice of the Spirit.

Third, Mary's was a **timely act**. It was "intended." She knew and acted. This was the moment. If she would have saved it for later; her own wedding or as part of a dowry...this moment would have passed. Life is full of uncertainties, for Mary and for you and I. So 'as we have opportunity, let us do good' Galatians 6:10. There is also divine intention. The Spirit is at work. There is divine purpose in her deed, preparation of Jesus' body for the day of his burial! Truly! God is a Master of timing. Exactly one week later, Jesus' body will lie in the cool and silence of a tomb in a Jerusalem garden.

Fourth, like Mary we may be criticized for our actions for others. While Jesus may approve, others may not - even within the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. There may be opposition from hearts that follow this world, like Judas, for whom our ministry and service seem a total waste. Opposition may also come from fellow disciples with their own agendas for our time, talents or treasure. We **will need fortitude** to serve Jesus.

Last, maybe the most memorable quality of Mary's action is its **reckless extravagance**. What an amazingly generous gift. Mary gave it all away; poured it all out for her Master. Lord, make us open to this kind of extravagance as we serve where you have planted us.

Verses 9-11 are the *final bookend* of new faith in our passage. The physical evidence of Lazarus' life brought many to Christ. May our lives also display the same evidence of Christ at work - from death to life and bring many to saving faith. John tells us that Lazarus is included in the Council's plot. He's a marked man. There is a cost to living for the Master.

Conclusion

As we serve Him, others will be blessed; perhaps as in Mary's case, far beyond our dreams. For what is done for Christ, however humble, becomes part of the indestructible whether it's changing diapers, nursing an ailing parent, friend or husband, telling Bible stories to a child, moping the floor, sharing hospice hours with the dying, preparing chicken soup for a neighbor. For as the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:68, '*Let nothing move you as you busy yourselves in the Lord's work. Be sure that nothing you ever do for him is ever lost or ever wasted.*'