

JOHN — WEEK 15

PHARISEES, SPIKENARD, AND PALMS



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

The chief priests and Pharisees continue expanding their plots and schemes. Their plans to kill Jesus are now taking shape. They even want to kill Lazarus.

Meanwhile, Mary commits a record-setting act of devotion and the people hail Jesus as their king.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

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1 John 11:47–52

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.”

And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.” Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.

John’s point here is that Caiaphas says something prophetic without knowing it. He thinks he’s just arguing that killing one guy is insignificant. Who cares that *one man should die* compared to *the whole nation* perishing?

But he didn’t just say, “*that one man should die.*” He says, “*that one man should die for the people.*” Those three extra words make all the difference. They barely make sense in the way Caiaphas means them.

One can argue that if they knock Jesus off to keep Him from getting Rome upset, He would be, in a figurative sense, dying for the people. It’s a stretch but still makeable.

Little does Caiaphas know, his prophesy will come true literally.

This was not just a coincidence; it was prophecy. John attributes it to Caiaphas’s office as high priest.

But how could Caiaphas prophesy without knowing it? He wasn’t in a trance. What does this say about God speaking through people without them knowing it? Does this apply to us now? What’s the takeaway?

Well, much of this can’t apply to us exactly. This event happened before the canon was closed, in a time of real prophecy. The reformed view (to which this author subscribes) is that supernatural gifts like prophecy ended with the end of the apostolic age. Miracles still happen, but not that one.

But God does bless people in unexpected ways, and sometimes He inspires people to function above their level. For example, this devotional was written by someone who never got above a “C” in any English class in high school. Writing was the very last thing I would have ever imagined I’d be doing.

But in 1992, I got an HP LaserJet printer for my birthday. As the only person in my church with a laser printer, I found myself doing a lot of printing (specifically the church bulletins). That led to my publishing the church newsletter, which led to writing a monthly column. In my next church, a friend asked me to take over his ministry of writing a daily devotional called the DEEP. The rest is, as they say, history.

I don’t know exactly what to call it, but that didn’t just happen randomly.

2 John 11:53–57

Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death. Therefore Jesus no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there into the country near the wilderness, to a city called Ephraim, and there remained with His disciples.

And the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went from the country up to Jerusalem before the Passover, to purify themselves. Then they sought Jesus, and spoke among themselves as they stood in the temple, “What do you think—that He will not come to the feast?” Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a command, that if anyone knew where He was, he should report it, that they might seize Him.

Chrysostom makes a great point about verse 53.

Before they only looked for ways to kill him. Now they ratify their determination and get down to business in determining how to carry it out. — Homilies on the Gospel of John 65.1

So Jesus decides to avoid them. Of course, He could have *walked openly among the Jews*. He has the power to do that and constantly frustrate their efforts to capture Him. So why doesn't He?

Scripture doesn't tell us, but maybe it's simply not His style. A series of repeated narrow escapes would be amusing, but, in a sense, mean. Jesus has the power to tease the chief priests and Pharisees relentlessly, but that's not His agenda.

He has more important things to do.

It's interesting that *the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a command, that if anyone knew where He was, he should report it, that they might seize Him*. This supports Chrysostom's point about verse 53, to an extreme extent.

The word translated as “command” (*entolas*) is very strong. It's the word Jesus uses for God's commandments (e.g. in Matthew 19:17 and Mark 10:19).

Entolas is also used for commands issued by a Roman magistrate. In either case, where do these guys get off thinking that they can issue commands with that kind of gravitas? They're not God, and they hold no civilian power. What are they thinking?

They're thinking that everyone must agree with them because they're so learned. They, of course, yield to God, but they think they've got Him all figured out. When they speak, it's as if God is speaking because they have puzzled through every nuance of His law.

So when they issue a “command”, it never occurs to them that they might be overreaching, because nothing is over the top for God and their word is His word.

3 John 12:1–8

Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it.

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always."

First of all, notice that Mary dumped a huge amount of this fragrant oil on Jesus. The word translated as "pound" (*litran*) is about a cup and a half. If she'd only used a portion of what was in the bottle, then the total amount wouldn't have been noted. Matthew 26:7 and Mark 14:3 record the same incident but add that Jesus's head was anointed (which is the norm with anointings). The passage in Mark clearly implies that the whole bottle was used up.

In other words, Jesus was drenched in the stuff. John notes that the whole *house was filled with the fragrance of the oil*. No one could not notice.

Also, note that a denarius is a day's pay for a hired hand. Assuming a weekly sabbath, *three hundred denarii* is almost a year's wages. Mary's act is amazing. It looks amazing and it smells amazing. It's an astonishing act, but it's Mary's bottle of spikenard and if that's what she wants to do with it, it's her choice. It's also Mary's hair, and if she wants to use it to wipe His feet (which is very degrading) that's her choice too.

She wants to show her total devotion, and she does it in such an impressive manner that this incident makes it into scripture three times.

John's recounting here is especially hard on Judas. Not only is he being a control freak, his claim to want to help the poor is a lie.

But notice that Jesus—who surely knows what Judas is up to—chooses not to call him out. Instead, He defends Mary's actions straight up. That makes sense. It's even essential.

Although Judas isn't sincere, he's saying something that others might be sincerely thinking. Calling Judas out on his duplicity would change the subject. His behavior is a topic for another day.

Instead, Jesus will use this incident as a teaching moment.

What Mary did is incredible, but it's actually appropriate.

4 John 12:9–11

Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus.

Lazarus is converting people left and right, so they *plotted to put Lazarus to death*. Of all the things the chief priests did, this one is the craziest. Why didn't they just talk to him? He wasn't in hiding. As this passage notes, people were coming to see him. Why does killing him even require plots?

Scripture doesn't say. Also, scripture doesn't record any of the conversations that Lazarus had with all these folks who were coming to see him. If you had a chance to talk to someone who had been dead—really, truly, stinking dead—and then came back, would you be interested? Any questions you might want to ask?

Right. Lazarus makes the Dos Equis “most interesting man in the world” seem positively boring.

So, he's converting multitudes to Jesus without even trying, and this is a problem for the chief priests.

See how comical, and profound, this is getting? The chief priests have worked themselves into a position that is becoming almost impossible to defend. They're not that far from wanting to execute half the population.

But they don't have an army. They don't have a police force. The Romans have all the big weapons. Plus, they have to avoid actually talking to Lazarus, or Jesus, or even any of the converts, for fear of how that conversation might go. God forbid they should find out they're wrong.

It'd all be funny if it wasn't so serious.

What's happening to the chief priests is a common psychological behavior. People simply aren't good at changing their minds or at admitting fault. This leads to an amazing phenomenon.

Prison ministers often admire many of the people they minister to. This isn't just words; they're serious. To the uninitiated, this is hard to understand. Many people assume that convicts are the worst society has to offer.

But no—at least not always and not in the end. People who have been completely humbled in court and in prison often learn a lesson that the rest of us could use a dose of.

I do not understand this—God has not called me to prison ministry—but I have seen this secondhand. Something significant is going on there.

Many of these folks have been radically transformed by Christ.

5 John 12:12–15

The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out:

*“Hosanna!
‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’
The King of Israel!”*

Then Jesus, when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written:

*“Fear not, daughter of Zion;
Behold, your King is coming,
Sitting on a donkey’s colt.”*

Q: When is a triumph actually a disaster?

A: This.

This event, known as the triumphal entry, looks and sounds great, but there’s a problem. The problem is the palm branches and the shouts of Hosanna. They’re nationalistic symbols celebrating the messiah who will release His people from the yoke of Rome.

But Jesus isn’t that kind of messiah. He’ll release them from the yoke alright—the yoke of sin.

Rome isn’t the issue.

Q: When is a disaster actually a triumph?

A: This.

This “triumphal entry” will set in motion the final sequence of events that leads to Jesus’s crucifixion. It’s a disaster, or at least it looks like one to anyone who understands who Jesus is and what Rome does with rebellious people.

Most importantly, this looks like a disaster to the ones who want it to be a disaster—Jesus’s enemies. They know all about Rome and they know that this can help set in motion a sequence of events that can get Him killed. They can see ahead to how this can play out.

But fortunately for us, Jesus’s enemies can only see so far ahead. They can’t see the ultimate, holy purpose for the “disaster.”

They’re thinking one step ahead, but not two.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you (or a friend) ever done something beyond any expectation?
2. Have you ever been surprised to learn that you knew less than you thought about something?
3. Have you ever seen an over-the-top act of love or devotion?
4. Have you ever been humiliated in a way that taught you something?
5. What disaster turned out good?

Items for prayer: