

The Plot to Kill Jesus
Matthew 26:1-5
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Matthew 26 begins the final section of the Gospel of Matthew, which serves as a climax to the narrative of Jesus' life with the account of His death and resurrection. This will conclude the last week of the life of Christ. Everything prior to this section has been leading to it, for this is the very purpose for why the Father sent the Son to earth. *"Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28).

It is ironic that the story of the death of Jesus immediately follows Jesus' prophecy of His judgment of all the nations in chapter 25. The judge of all the nations will be handed over for crucifixion by the very people who were supposed to be leading the people of Israel toward righteousness. This sharp contrast regarding the Son of Man when *"He comes in His glory"* (25:31) versus the Son of Man *"handed over for crucifixion"* is unmistakable.

Each of the four Gospels provides an extensive section of their work to describe the betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. While Matthew devotes three chapters to this section, Mark, a much shorter Gospel, also devotes three chapters to it (Mark 14-16), although fewer words. Luke's three chapters (Luke 22-24) constitute the longest account of this part of the story of Jesus among the synoptic Gospels. John's Gospel is by far the most detailed regarding the end of the life of Jesus, with much of his account containing additional details, including His teaching in the Upper Room (John 13-17).

Matthew's Gospel has a couple of dozen unique aspects that the other Gospels lack. This largely derives from Matthew's unique place as one of Jesus' twelve disciples, his Jewish audience for his writing, and his specific theological emphases. In addition, there are more challenges in understanding Matthew in light of the other Gospels in this final section than in the previous sections. These will be addressed as we proceed through these last three chapters.

Matthew's account is not in a strictly chronological order. As in previous chapters, Matthew arranges his record more thematically than chronologically, following a logical sequence of events that build toward his purpose. Matthew uses this section to explain how Jesus will forgive sins (cf. Matthew 9:6), through giving His life as a ransom for many (cf. Matthew 20:28).

Jesus' death predicted (26:1-2)

Matthew 26 begins with his manner of ending a previous section of the Gospel and transitioning to the next section. This transition, "*When Jesus had finished all these words*" is also seen following each of Jesus' other four discourses in this Gospel (cf. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1). This makes it clear that Matthew is beginning a new section of his account.

Matthew then recorded the words that Jesus spoke to His disciples, "*You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be handed over for crucifixion.*" That this was "*said to His disciples*" tells us that all the disciples were present. Mark 13:3-4 informs us that "*Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?'*" This question set up the Olivet Discourse. Whether Jesus spoke the entire text of Matthew 24-25 to those four disciples, or whether He allowed the other disciples to hear this teaching too is unclear, but Matthew does make the point that this prediction of His death was given to His disciples.

This is the fourth time in this Gospel that Matthew records Jesus explicitly predicting His upcoming death, having done so earlier in Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; and 20:17-18. In each of the other three predictions of His death, Jesus told them that "*on the third day He will be raised up.*" Yet in Matthew 26:2, there is no mention of His resurrection.

In this instance, Jesus informs His disciples about the timing of when this crucifixion would happen, connecting His death with the upcoming Passover. This Passover will be "*after two days.*" The Passover would take place on Friday. Therefore, this further supports the view that it was Wednesday when Jesus spoke the Olivet Discourse.

By modern-day reckoning, two days after Wednesday would be Friday and Saturday would be the day after two days. However, the Jewish custom was to consider a part of one day as being a whole day. This explains why Jesus was raised "*on the third day*" when He was crucified on Friday and resurrected from the dead on Sunday morning. If the events of Matthew 21-25 took place on Tuesday, then by Jewish reckoning, the Passover would take place after three days, not after two days. This is one of several reasons why the very common view of a "silent Wednesday," with the theory that the Gospels record nothing happening, is highly unlikely. "*After two days*" in Jewish custom was Wednesday to Friday.

To review the final week of Jesus' ministry:

1. Saturday: Jesus arrived in Bethany, "*six days before the Passover*" (John 12:1), where that evening Jesus' feet were anointed at the home of Simon the leper (John 12:1-8; Matthew 26:6-13).
2. Sunday: A large crowd gathered in Bethany to see Jesus (John 12:9-11).
3. Monday: The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem by Jesus (Matthew 21:1-9; John 12:12), followed by His visit to the temple (Matthew 21:10-11) and a return to Bethany.
4. Tuesday: Jesus cursed the fig tree on the way from Bethany to Jerusalem (Matthew 21:18-19), followed by His cleansing of the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). There was the early plan to kill Jesus by the religious leaders (Mark 11:18-19; Luke 19:47-48). Jesus then left Jerusalem and returned to Bethany.
5. Wednesday: On the way back to Jerusalem, Jesus and His disciples encountered the withered fig tree (Matthew 21:20-22; Mark 11:20-26). Upon arriving, The Jews sought to trap Jesus and argue with Him (Matthew 21:23—23:39). After He departed Jerusalem for the Mount of Olives to give the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25), Jesus predicted His death again, while Judas plotted his betrayal of Jesus.
6. Thursday: Jesus and the disciples ate a Passover meal together in the upper room (Matthew 26:17-35) and Jesus then taught them in the upper room (John 14-17). Afterward, they went to the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46) before the arrest of Jesus and the first trial before the high priest that night (Matthew 26:47-75).
7. Friday: Jesus was tried before Jewish and then Roman leaders in the morning, leading to the crucifixion (Matthew 27:1-30). He died on the cross in the afternoon (Matthew 27:31-60) and was buried in the evening (Matthew 27:57-61).
8. Saturday: The body of Jesus was in the tomb on the Sabbath, guarded by the Romans (Matthew 27:62-66).
9. Sunday: Christ was resurrected from the dead in the morning (Matthew 28:1-7) and appeared to His followers (Matthew 28:8-20).

Jesus' death plotted (26:3-5)

The desire by various religious leaders to kill Jesus had existed for quite some time. Now, this desire becomes a more coordinated plot against Him. This would be unsurprising in light of the public conflicts that Jesus had with various religious leaders who sought to trap Him earlier in the day (Matthew 21:23 - 22:46). This active plan fits well with the prediction by Jesus of His crucifixion in verse 2. This shows the climax of this Gospel forming.

The opposition to Jesus began early in Jesus' public ministry:

"For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18).

"But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him" (Matthew 12:14).

"So from that day on they planned together to kill Him" (John 11:53).

"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet" (Matthew 21:45-46).

We saw the chief priests and elders together opposing Jesus when He entered the temple early that same day, *"When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?'"* (Matthew 21:23). These two groups worked together on the oversight of the temple as they represented the full-time clerics and the leading men of the city who ruled together on the Sanhedrin, representing the Sadducees.

They *"gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas."* By this time in Judea, the high priest was appointed by the Romans and Caiaphas had held this position for roughly fifteen years. He married the daughter of the previous high priest, Annas, to gain this place (cf. John 18:13). The Jews considered the high priest to be a lifetime position, which explains why Acts 4:6 regards Annas as the high priest. Due to the authority of Rome over the Jews, Caiaphas held the power of the position. Also, due to the family relationship, Annas and Caiaphas worked closely together (cf. Luke 3:2; John 18:19-24).

As high priest, Caiaphas oversaw all the priests of the temple and was the only one who could offer sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. He profited from the buying, selling and the money-changing in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). Since Caiaphas epitomized the corruption of the temple, it was fitting that this plot occurred in his court.

The plot by the chief priests and elders *“to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him”* alludes to Psalm 31:13, *“While they took counsel together against me, They schemed to take away my life.”* Psalm 31 is also quoted by Jesus on the cross when He said, *“Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT”* (Psalm 31:5). The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is a major theme throughout the final section of Matthew’s Gospel.

The reason they had to seize Jesus *“by stealth”* was because they were concerned that *“a riot might occur among the people.”* The religious leaders *“plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth”* due to the very large following of people who had entered the city with Jesus in Matthew 21:8-11. Many of them had come from Galilee, seen His miracles, listened to His teaching and shouted, *“Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!”* when He entered Jerusalem. This swell of visitors to the city was so great that Josephus estimated over a quarter of a million lambs were slain for the feast. Traditionally, over ten people ate one lamb, so the number of people crowding the city was immense.

There is no wonder that the leaders were concerned that so many people had come from distant places to Jerusalem, were not familiar to the chief priests and elders, and proclaimed allegiance to Him. It is understandable that the leaders did not want Jesus to be seized *“during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people.”* The better strategy would be to seize Jesus and kill Him at a time when there were far fewer Jews who might come to the defense of Jesus and threaten the leadership of elders and priests. This would be after the festival, which would be not only after Passover but after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasted seven days later.

However, God’s sovereign plan overrode the plot of the religious leaders. The prophecy of Christ’s sacrifice was being fulfilled through these Jews, regardless of their strategy. When Judas gave them the opportunity to arrest Jesus by stealth (Matthew 26:14-16; 27-50), they jumped at the chance, in spite of these concerns about the crowd. God’s will prevailed, on His timetable.

Conclusion

The gathering of the chief priests to plot Jesus' death demonstrates how corrupt these leaders of the temple had become. Their role as priests was to serve the Jewish people through the offering of perfect sacrifices. Yet they themselves were corrupt, having turned the temple into their own den of robbers (Matthew 21:13). Their plot against Jesus, the one true sacrifice for the sin of the world, was their most evil deed of all.

The elders of the people joined with the chief priests. These leading men of Jerusalem supported the corruption of the buying, selling and money-changing that oppressed those coming to worship on Passover. They served with the chief priests on the ruling council that was supposed to be just, but would be engaged in the great injustice in the show trial in the court of the Sanhedrin in opposition to the Son of God.

The Jewish people were also participants in this plot, for the elders were *"of the people."* These supporters of the elders were not the people that the chief priests and elders were concerned with in Matthew 26:5, *"But they were saying, 'Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people.'"* The people whom the chief priests and elders were afraid of was the swell of people who had populated Jerusalem for the Passover.

We will see the people whom the elders represented demanded the death of Jesus, saying *"His blood shall be on us and on our children!"* in Matthew 27:25. These people were those supporters of the religious leaders who were not followers of Jesus. Throughout the history of the nation of Israel, there were always a contingent of unbelievers.

Likewise, we should not be surprised that a contingent of unbelievers will exist within the church, who are attracted to the power and prestige that comes from religion. Just as these people within Judea unjustly opposed the Righteous Judge, so there will be people within the church who will unjustly oppose Him as well. Paul wrote of His unbelieving countrymen, *"For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God"* (Romans 10:3). Whenever church people ignore the revelation of God's righteousness in His word, and legalistically replace His will with what they consider to be the better way, they follow in the same path as these evil chief priests and elders. When people ignore the needs of the brothers of Jesus, they will be condemned for their unrighteous judgment.