

Aug. 31-Sept. 4, 2024 Edition

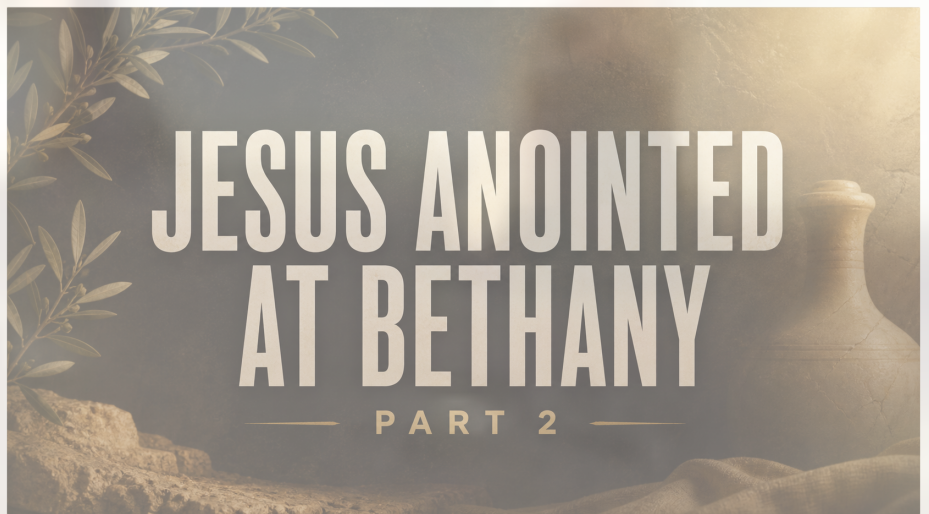
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The Year_(s) Of Jesus Part 243

Jesus Anointed At Bethany: The Final Week Begins

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;D) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to be focusing on the story of Mary of Bethany (I have to specify which Mary I'm talking about because there are so many of them in the New Testament— in fact, in first-century Israel about 25% of all girl babies were named Mary, which you see the evidence for in the gospels where we read about Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, who was the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and there were a couple of other women tossed in there who were sometimes called Mary too, which could make it very confusing, sort of like this run-on sentence parenthetically inserted into this paragraph, which now you're going to have to go back and read the start of that sentence if the rest of this sentence is going to make any sense at all to you) who anointed Jesus at Bethany just six days before the crucifixion.

This story marks the beginning of the final week of Jesus's time on this earth before his sacrificial death. Thankfully, the sacrificial death was not the end of the story, but we'll talk more about that when we get closer to Easter. If you've been with us over the last few weeks at Riverside— either in person at the building or listening in online or through the podcast— then you know that the story that immediately precedes this story is the resurrection of Lazarus. Turns out the resurrection of Lazarus was a turning point for the religious leaders who despised and wanted him dead:

So from that time on, the Jewish leaders began to plot Jesus' death. As a result, Jesus stopped his public ministry among the people and left Jerusalem. He went to a place near the wilderness, to the village of Ephraim, and stayed there with his disciples. John 11:53-54 (NLT)

They had always wanted him dead, but this lit a fire under them. Now they were willing to take more risks to do whatever it took in order to get rid of Jesus. I wonder sometimes if that's part of what made Jesus so angry at the graveside of Lazarus. If you didn't hear my lesson about Lazarus, then maybe go back and read John chapter 11 for yourself and notice that when John talks about Jesus's emotions, he doesn't talk about how sad Jesus is – he talks about how angry Jesus is, and when you take all of John chapter 11, and its context, and put it together with the shortest verse in the Bible (Jesus wept), the picture that we're given is not gentle, crying, but rather ugly crying that would've seemed more like bellowing rage.

Who was Jesus angry with? Well, I guarantee you it wasn't the people that were at Lazarus' funeral. He had nothing but compassion for them. So then, who was he mad at? Well, first and foremost, I think he was mad at Satan. And I think as he stood at that grave, he didn't just see all of the people that were there grieving in mourning. I think he looked into the future and into the past and saw every human that had ever stood at a graveside of someone that they loved desperately. And yes, it broke his heart, but it also made him bellow with rage.

I also think that he realized that this would be the straw that broke the camel's back when it came to the religious leaders. He may have even had Satan whispering in his ear that if He resurrected Lazarus, it would guarantee His own death. But he knew that if he was going to interrupt the funerals of every human who would ever live going forward for the rest of human history, then he would have to go to his own funeral. So much emotion, and as we move forward into the final six days of his life, we will see all of the emotions rising up and impacting Jesus in ways that we haven't seen in the first 3 1/2 years of his ministry up until

this point. Why? Didn't he know what he was getting himself into? Didn't he know this was the plan all along?

Yes, but as all humans know, there is a difference between knowing and knowing. For instance, when Judy was pregnant with Jonathan, we read the book, *What To Expect When You're Expecting*. We wanted to know what to expect, and the book told us everything to expect. We thought we knew what we were getting ourselves into. But when he was born, we realized that there is a difference between knowing and knowing. I think Jesus is experiencing the same thing –the human side of Him is. It's one of the reasons he had to come. So that he would understand exactly what we go through.

So this week we're looking at this story which happens just a few days after the resurrection of Lazarus. We will look at what Jesus is anointing by Mary of Bethany meant to him and what it can mean to us, but as we finish today's reflection, let's read what happened:

Six days before the Passover celebration began, Jesus arrived in Bethany, the home of Lazarus- the man he had raised from the dead. A dinner was prepared in Jesus' honor. Martha served, and Lazarus was among those who ate with him. Then Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from the essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it, wiping his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance. But Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would soon betray him, said, "That perfume was worth a year's wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor." Not that he cared for the poor; he was a thief, and since he was in charge of the disciples' money, he often stole some for himself. Jesus replied, "Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." When all the people heard of Jesus' arrival, they flocked to see him and also to see Lazarus, the man Jesus had raised from the dead. Then the leading priests decided to kill Lazarus, too, for it was because of him that many of the people had deserted them and believed in Jesus. John 12:1-11 (NLT)

Tuesday Reflection: This week we are focusing on the story of Jesus being anointed at Bethany six days before the crucifixion. Now, if you've been with us through very much of this 242-week marathon lesson series where we are looking at the story of Jesus's life in chronological order, then you know that I've been telling you that more than 50% of the gospels is dedicated to the final week of Jesus' life. So, I thought that when we got to the final week of his life, we would still have more than half of the series to get through. But I don't think that's true anymore. What I'm realizing is how many of the stories in the last week of Jesus's life are told in more than one gospel.

The whole idea behind the chronological story of Jesus' life was to hit each story once. In other words, the feeding of the 5000 is told in all four gospels, but we only talked about that story once in this series. Well, in the first 3 1/2 years of Jesus' life, there are an awful lot of stories that are only told in one gospel, so it is taking us an enormous amount of time to get here. But going forward, most of these stories are told in multiple gospels, and so I don't think it'll take nearly as long to get through the rest of the stories as it has for us to get here.

And this story that we're looking at today is told in three of the gospel- only Luke leaves this story out. I'm still not exactly sure how long it will take us to get through this last week, but

using my vast pool of planning resources, I'm going to guess somewhere between one and a half and 2 1/2 years rather than the almost 5 it's taken us to get here. We'll see how close I am when we get to the end of the story.

So, let's jump into this week's story and talk about Grace. Because I think this story is all about Grace. It's about God's grace to us and our response to that grace. And in this, more specifically, Mary's response to God's grace:

Six days before the Passover celebration began, Jesus arrived in Bethany, the home of Lazarus- the man he had raised from the dead. A dinner was prepared in Jesus' honor. Martha served, and Lazarus was among those who ate with him. John 12:1-2 (NLT)

Now before we get to Mary, I want to take just a minute and notice the other people at the party – Lazarus and Martha. If we hadn't just been talking about what happened in John chapter 11 (the resurrection of Lazarus), then this would seem like another dinner that had been invited to. But since we've been reading the Bible in context, going through these stories in chronological order, we know that this is more than just some ordinary dinner party – and so does Mary. This is a remarkable snapshot of God's grace in the lives of Mary's family.

And when she walks in and sees the scene with her brother – who just a few days ago, she was in day four of a seven-day morning period because of his death – sitting and eating while their sister Martha (in typical Martha fashion) is in charge serving the meal, she is struck by the sheer weight of God's grace in her life.

And that's the first movement of grace that I see in this story. That grace does not forget. Grace remembers. Mary takes all of this in, and it fills her with such emotion and gratitude that a spontaneous act of unrestrained worship takes place that almost nobody else understood:

Then Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from the essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it, wiping his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance. John 12:3 (NLT)

That last sentence is about more than just an aroma. It's about grace. Grace can fill a room and change the atmosphere of a place just like an aroma can. Have you ever gone into a room and know exactly what was going on in that room before you got there just because of how it smelled? I remember after that big earthquake in 2018. There was an aroma in our house like nothing I had ever smelled before. Judy had gotten into making her own kombucha. People either love that stuff or they hate it, and I'll just tell you that I do not love it. She had these massive 2-gallon glass jars that she used to ferment the kombucha, and when the earthquake struck, they both fell over and shattered, filling our house with the aroma of kombucha.

To make matters worse, she had some essential oils in our medicine cabinet that also fell out during that earthquake and shattered. She had cinnamon, clove, lemon, peppermint, and I'm guessing there are many more that I'm missing. Even though it was freezing outside. We had all of the windows open trying to air that place out. That aroma (if that's what you want to call it) was overwhelming.

Grace can do the same thing. And whether anyone else in the room notices it or not – God notices it. And just like nobody else understood what Mary had done, but Jesus – often God is the only one who understands when we have brought the aroma of grace into a room. And how do we do that? We'll talk about that tomorrow, but for today, I hope that you'll spend some time reflecting on what it means that Grace doesn't forget.

Wednesday Reflection: Yesterday we talked about how one of the movements of grace from this story about Jesus being anointed at Bethany by Mary was that Grace does not forget. We talked about how the Bible uses the metaphor of aroma to explain how God feels about our unrestrained expressions of grace in response to the Grace that he has expressed towards us. But what are these unrestrained expressions of grace that can fill a room every bit as much as the smell of cinnamon rolls sometimes fills the church building on Sunday mornings when our youth minister Tayler is baking?

Well, let me give you an instance. Whenever God's people forgive, the aroma of grace fills the room. Other people may not understand it or even appreciate it – just like nobody else understood or appreciated Mary's unrestrained act of grace when she anointed Jesus with that expensive perfume. But Jesus understood. Jesus appreciated it. And in the end, that's all that mattered.

Now I can't even mention forgiveness without talking about it for a little bit. There is so much misinformation out there about what forgiveness is and isn't that it's not a concept that I can mention and just move on. What I've learned over the last 27 years of ministry is that most of us feel like if we're still mad, then we have not forgiven. Let me tell you, nothing could be further from the truth. You probably heard the phrase, forgive and forget, but you won't find that phrase in the Bible. It's impossible to forget. God doesn't expect it or demand it. What God asks is that we forgive, even though we remember.

Because that's what forgiveness is. The word in the Bible that is translated into English as "forgiveness" was actually used mainly in the banking industry. It meant simply to let go. So if a loan was "forgiven," it meant that the lender had released the debt and was going to absorb the cost of the repayment of that loan himself. That's what God did with us through Jesus at the cross. It's not that the debt we incurred at Eden just disappeared. God paid that debt for us. That's forgiveness. Often times, we think that if we forgive someone, then no one's going to pay for what they did, but that is completely wrong. Someone does pay. You do. The one who forgives pays the debt.

And often it is dealing with that anger over what was done that we see just how costly forgiveness is. Just because you're still mad doesn't mean you haven't forgiven. In fact, it is a vivid reminder of just how costly forgiveness is. And every time someone forgives and deals with that anger and that sense of injustice, grace fills the room. And we may not see it, but God does. And it is a sweet aroma that fills him with such pride and such joy that we are working our patooties off to try to become more like his son (and if you don't like the word patootie, you're just going to have to forgive me for its use— look at me, giving you a chance to become more like Jesus ;o)

But it's not just forgiveness. Anytime you accept someone because Jesus has asked you to grace fills a room. Anytime you love someone that is unlovable because Jesus asked you to

grace fills a room. Anytime you sacrifice your time or your energy or your resources in the name of Jesus, grace fills the room. We see the picture of that with Mary, breaking the perfume and anointing Jesus's feet, but from God's perspective, he sees it every time we love, accept, or forgive in response to the love acceptance and forgiveness that he has poured out into our own lives. And I wish I could tell you it gets easier as you go through this life with Jesus, but it doesn't. But it does become more familiar. Mary's act of worship did not spontaneously arise the first time she dealt with Jesus. What we see in Mary's story is a progression and, interestingly, every time Mary has mentioned, she is at the feet of Jesus. The first time we meet her is in the gospel of Luke:

As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught. Luke 10:38-39 (NLT)

Now that phrase sat-at-the-Lord's-feet is more than just about her proximity to Jesus. That phrase was used of the disciple-rabbi relationship. When a disciple was said to be sitting at the feet of his rabbi (and I say "his" because there was no such thing as a female disciple in the ancient world – not until Jesus shows up) meant that he was learning from his rabbi. With Luke, uses this phrase in his gospel to explain what Mary was doing. Everybody in the first century would've known exactly what he was saying. Mary was being described as one of Jesus' disciples. And so when we first meet Mary, she is trying to learn what Jesus teaches about how we should live this life. How we should relate to God, how we should relate to other people, and how we should relate to ourselves.

But the next time that we meet Mary, she is struggling with something. Her brother has just died, and even though they sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, Jesus didn't come back and heal him. In fact, he waited several days and was even late for the funeral. When Jesus does finally show up four days into the mourning period, this is what happens:

When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." John 11:32 (NLT)

Can you hear the accusation in that statement? It's a statement of fact from Mary, but it is also a question that I imagine is rocking her faith. And if you've lived long enough, you've had a similar sentiment. Wondering why God didn't show up for you the way that you thought he should show up for you. Why he didn't do what you thought he should do or did something that you thought he shouldn't have. There have been a lot of people throughout history that those questions have caused them to walk away from Jesus. But notice where Mary is. Once again, she is at his feet. Now it's not so much about learning as it is about trying to hold on for all that she has when she is struggling to understand why Jesus didn't do what she thought he should do.

And when her brother walks out of that grave, she has a new understanding of who Jesus is. And that understanding erupts into a spontaneous act of unrestrained worship that we are still talking about 2000 years later.

Then Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from the essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it, wiping his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance. John 12:3 (NLT)

But that brings us back to you and me. We love these stories from the Bible, where things work out the way that we would love for them to work out in our own lives. But like I said, if you live long enough, you will eventually look to heaven and ask God where he was when you needed him the most. Like Mary, we will say to him, if you had been here, things would have been different. The unsaid words there are, where were you when I needed you? So what do we do when we are lying at the feet of Jesus, holding on for all that we're worth, trying to understand why he didn't do what we thought he should do or why he did what we didn't think he should do?

I think we have to hold on to the words that Jesus spoke to Mary, sister Martha, when she asked Jesus, the exact same question that Mary asked – where were you? Why weren't you here? And what were Jesus' words to Martha? He simply said, your brother will rise again. And then he spoke some of the most famous words that he ever said:

Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." "Yes," Martha said, "he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last resurrection." Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?" John 11:23-26 (NLT)

I believe with all of my heart that every single one of us is going to have a Lazarus moment when Jesus returns to renew, redeem, and restore everything. And I believe at that point, we will understand why Jesus did what he did or didn't do what he didn't do. And as we stand together with all of our friends, family, and loved ones who have gone on before us, and we see things more clearly than we ever have in our entire lives, we will have a Mary moment. A moment when we look at everything that God has done for us, and it will overflow into an unstrained moment of worship, and the grace of that moment will fill the room. And imagine, it will be happening for billions of us at the same time.

There are people I am really looking forward to seeing again and some that I never got to meet on this side of eternity that my heart still aches for. I have a feeling the same could be said for you. Maybe today you and I could reflect on what it would look like to live our lives today in a way that will make us proud of how we dealt with the pain of all of the loss that we had to deal with on this side of eternity when we finally get to the other side. Jesus came so that death and loss would never have the last say in our lives. Let's live today like we believe it.

Jesus. Is. Awesome.

Thursday Reflection: Well, it only took us three days to get through the first movement of grace in this story, which was, "Grace doesn't forget." I'm starting to sense that there may be a Saturday reflection coming for this week's lesson, but we'll just see how it goes. The 2nd movement of grace that I think this story shows us is that Grace doesn't calculate. We marry looked out at the scene that was before her with her brother who had been dead, just a few days earlier, eating dinner with Jesus and his disciples while her sister

Martha bossed people around in the kitchen. The ordinariness of that moment contrasted with the spectacular unordinariness of that moment and erupted into a spontaneous moment of unrestrained grace on her part. She had this jar of perfume that would've been the most expensive thing that she owned. And she didn't think twice. She did what she felt. She poured every single bit of it out on the feet of Jesus.

She didn't think twice about it – but Judas did:

But Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would soon betray him, said, "That perfume was worth a year's wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor." Not that he cared for the poor- he was a thief, and since he was in charge of the disciples' money, he often stole some for himself. John 12:4-6 (NLT)

And here we get one of the first inklings that there's something wrong with Judas. Mary does not calculate her unrestrained expression of grace, but Judas does. Not because Judas cared about the poor, but because Judas had his own agenda. And Jesus wasn't getting with Judas' program. Nobody knows for sure what was in Judas' heart, but we will see more and more of this as we approach the cross, culminating in Judas' betrayal of Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

But Mary doesn't count the cost. Or if she does, the accounting shows that Jesus is worth far more than even the most expensive thing that she possesses. And what's wild is that Mary seems to see Jesus and hear him more clearly than anyone else at that moment.

Jesus has been telling his disciples for years that he has come to die. For the last couple of months, he has been telling them over and over and over as they make their way towards Jerusalem that when he gets there, the religious leaders will arrest him and kill him. But he also tells them that he will not stay dead. That after three days in the tomb, he will rise. And yet the disciples just don't seem to hear him. Or maybe they refuse to hear him.

But at this moment, it seems like Mary hears him clearly. And she decides that she wants to have a moment with Jesus before his death rather than waiting until afterwards to honor him. One of my friends at church got a death sentence about 3 1/2 years ago. Stage four cancer that they told him was incurable. They told him there was nothing they could do for him, except perhaps prolong his life a little bit. If he got aggressive chemotherapy, they could pretty much guarantee him one more year, but told him that much more than that would be a pipe dream. After 3 1/2 years and him still being around, he decided to have a reverse memorial service. He decided to have his friends and family come and join him at his house for a living room concert and instead of asking everyone to say something nice about him, the requirement was that everybody had to insult him. He even had a list of good insults on the refrigerator door in his kitchen if we had a hard time figuring out how to put him down.

As I sat there and listened to the concert that night, I thought what a great idea. A reverse memorial to spend some time together rather than waiting until someone dies. I kind of wonder if that's not what Mary had in mind that night. Sure, she could wait and put this expensive perfume on Jesus after his death (which she was starting to realize was rapidly approaching) or she could do it while Jesus was still alive to be able to appreciate it.

And I think we can see that Jesus completely appreciated it. I imagine he felt very alone with nobody able to hear what he was saying, even as he was struggling with himself. But Mary

sees him. And Mary responds with this beautiful act of grace. She didn't count the cost or calculate the value of what she was giving Jesus. It's not an easy thing to do unless you were first given Jesus everything. And that's what the Bible suggests we all do:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your lives as a living sacrifice. Romans 12:1 (NIV)

I think the idea is that once you have given God your entire life, it's easier to stop counting the cost of the things that we have that we could offer him as well. What I've noticed, though, is that the problem with a living sacrifice is, it's awfully easy to walk ourselves off of the altar. Dead sacrifices can't go anywhere. But living sacrifices often do. That's why I think it's so important that we keep our eyes firmly on God's mercy and grace in our lives. Otherwise, it's too easy for us to calculate value when it comes to what we are willing to give to Jesus.

Maybe today you and I could spend some time reflecting on what it means to offer our lives as a living sacrifice. Have we done that? And if we have, how do we stop ourselves from walking away from that altar?

Friday Reflection: So far this week, we've looked at how grace doesn't forget and how grace doesn't calculate. Today we will look at how the grace of God in our lives can lead to holiness. Now, I know that the word holiness doesn't show up in the story of Jesus being anointed at Bethany by Mary, but I think it is one of the best pictures of holiness that you'll find in the gospels.

But first, we need to talk a little bit about this word holy. What does it mean to you when you hear the word holy? Growing up, we sang a song in our church called, Holy, Holy, Holy. It was based on Isaiah's view into the throne room of heaven in the book of Isaiah and John's recording of a similar view in the book of Revelation. It is the hymn of heaven:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty- the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come." Revelation 4:8 (NLT)

But what does it mean? I always thought holy meant perfect. Sinless. Without blemish. And when that word is being applied to God, that is part of it. But it's not all of it. Not even close. The Hebrew word for holy is qadosh. And there is an aspect of purity and perfection in that word, but it was mainly used to talk about something that was completely unique. In fact, in Hebrew, the opposite of the word for holy is not sinful – it's common or ordinary. You see that throughout the Old Testament in statements like this:

No one is holy like the Lord! There is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. 1 Samuel 2:2 (NLT)

God is completely "other". No one like him. No one beside him. He is completely unique. But there is another way that that word is used. It is used for something that is set apart for a specific purpose or calling. And it is in that sense that the word holiness can and does apply to each one of us who are followers of Jesus. So I understand that we're going to have to walk through some deep weeds, and I hope that I don't lose you as I wrestle with this concept. Because this concept is one that I'm still having a tough time wrapping my brain around, and

I'm just confessing right up front that you might see some of that struggle leaking through as I try to explain this concept of holiness, and how it applies to this story and each one of our lives.

So let's go back to the very beginning. God creates a perfect world and he places his dearly loved children in that world so that he can love and enjoy us forever and so that we can learn to love and enjoy him forever. It is his world and the people belong to him, and he belongs to its people. That was God's great dream. But that dream is shattered when we decide that we know better than God how to live our lives. We go our own way and God keeps trying to bring us back to his original plan and we keep resisting it. Read the first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis and you will see this pattern repeating. At the end of chapter 11, we read about one of the strangest stories in the Bible – the tower of Babel. It's kind of hard to see from our modern way of thinking, but that story represents another rejection of God's offer of intimacy, and so God separates humans into people groups, each with its own language and as it would turn out, each with its own god.

So when you get to the end of Genesis chapter 11, the world is filled with nations that each have their own language and their own god but there is no nation and there is no people group that call Yahweh their God. So God goes to a man named Abram in Genesis chapter 12 and he makes Abram an offer. He tells Abram that He will make a great nation out of Abram and that through Abram every other nation on earth will be blessed. The word "holy" is never used in the story of Abram's calling but the idea is there. Abram is being "set apart" by God for a specific purpose. He is being called to a holy life. Not perfect. Not sinless. If you've read the story, then you know that that is accurate. All God is asking for from Abram is that Abram live his life through and with and for and in Yahweh. And that's what Abram does.

About 500 years later, Abram's descendants are camped around Mount Sinai after having been released from slavery in Egypt. God is ready to fulfill the promise that he made to Abram. But if the descendants of Abraham are going to become a new nation who calls Yahweh their God, there is a set of conditions that they must live up to. We call them the 10 Commandments. Sometimes when people talk about the 10 Commandments, it will almost seem like they're describing a set of moral and ethical guidelines that are impossible to live up to. But what they really are is the baseline of what it takes to live in community with God, and with others. I mean, think about it, God asks that we not lie to each other, that we not murder each other, that we not steal from each other, etc.

Really the 10 Commandments are not some moral high bar that is impossible to get over – as a matter of fact, the bar is set so low that we have to slither to get underneath it. And God tells Israel that if they are willing to live up to these ethical guidelines, then they will be his nation, and he will be there God:

Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' Exodus 19:5-6 (NLT)

Israel became God's "holy" nation. What does that mean? Does that mean they're perfect and flawless like God? If you've read the story, you know that that's not the case. In this case "holiness" refers to the fact that Israel will have a unique role in this world. It will not be the

common role that the rest of the nations have but rather they will be the one nation on earth through home. Every other nation on this earth is blessed. Israel doesn't understand it, but God's plan is that through Israel he would send his son who would pay the debt that we could never hope to pay and so doing redeem us.

But even though all Israel had to do was follow those 10 Commandments, they couldn't do it. Or rather, they wouldn't do it. They constantly rebelled and rejected God, and for centuries, God sent prophet after prophet after prophet to warn them to come back. He warned them what would happen if they continued to reject him – that he would have to leave, and when he did, Israel would be destroyed. But they wouldn't listen, and you can read about it in the book of Ezekiel – the moment that Yahweh and his glory left the temple in Jerusalem and went back to the throne room in heaven. Almost immediately, Israel was destroyed, but it didn't mean that God was done with humanity – he just had a new plan.

From that point forward, the prophets had one major message: the glory of God will return. And on the very first Christmas, that's exactly what happened. God returned to this earth in the person of Jesus. Who lived the life we should've lived, but none of us did. And then, who died the death that we all would've been destined to die if someone hadn't stepped in and paid the debt that we could never hope to pay. And now, with his resurrection, he earns a reward that rightfully belongs only to him, but that he will share with anyone who will put their trust in him. And for those who do, God has a plan for their lives. And that plan sounds eerily familiar:

For you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9 (NLT)

Those words are no longer directed at the nation of Israel. They are directed at each and every one of us who trust Jesus with our lives. If you are a follower of Jesus, then you are called to a life of holiness. Not perfection. Not sinlessness. But set apart for a specific purpose. Yesterday we read the first part of Romans 12:1, but I stopped before the end of it because I had a feeling I would want to bring it back up today, so let's finish reading what Paul had to say at the end of Romans 12:1:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your lives as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God- this is your true and proper worship. Romans 12:1 (NIV)

We talked about the living sacrifice yesterday, but I left out what that sacrifice meant to God. When we make our lives a living sacrifice, God sees it as "holy" and pleasing to him. Why would he see our lives and the sacrifices that we make as "holy"? Because just like Israel was intended to be the nation through whom his blessings flowed to the rest of the world, now our lives are the vehicles through which God's blessings flow into the rest of the world.

And that brings us back around to Mary's unrestrained expression of grace in response to the grace of God in her life. Mary was not alone with Jesus in that room. There were lots of other people there, but when it came to the gift that Mary gave to Jesus, she might as well have been alone with him in her own mind. She didn't count the cost of what she was giving; she

gave in response to the grace of God in her life, and the result was a gift that impacted Jesus in a way that I don't think we'll ever fully understand:

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Mark 14:6-9 (NLT)

Mary's act was an act of holiness. An expression of a life set apart for a very specific and unique mission through which the blessings of God would flow through her life to impact the world around her. And as Jesus predicted, here we are almost 2000 years later (only seven years shy of that at this point) still talking about it.

And as I said, a few days ago, whenever someone forgives or accepts or loves when it's costly to do so, the aroma of grace fills this world the same way that Mary's gift did just six days before Jesus' death. And so I'll leave you with this to reflect on for the rest of the day:

Now God uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume. Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God. 2 Corinthians 2:14-15 (NLT)