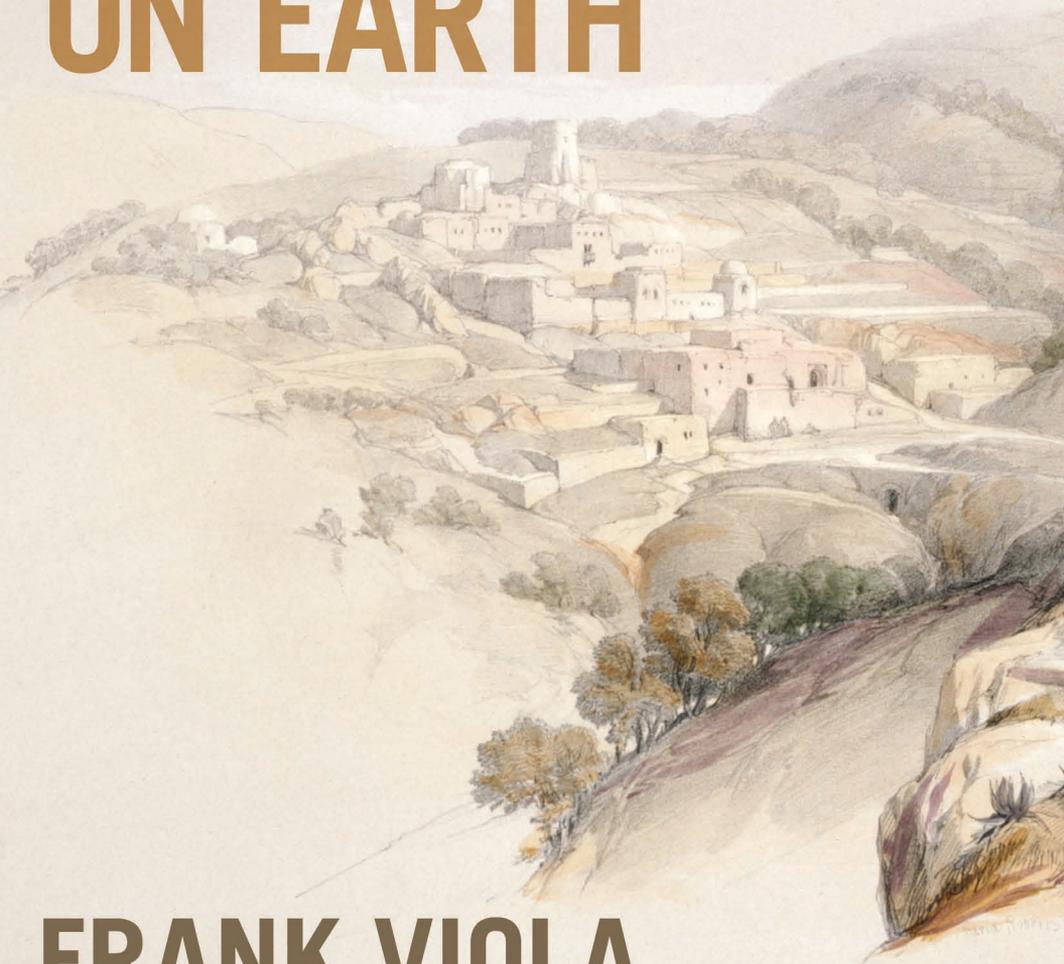


GOD'S FAVORITE PLACE ON EARTH



FRANK VIOLA

Praise for ...

GOD'S FAVORITE PLACE ON EARTH

“In Frank Viola’s hands, the story of Lazarus—like Lazarus himself—once again comes to life. In a world where hope is battered and life can so easily beat down the human spirit, we are reminded once more of the possibility of becoming a host of Life. The gift given to Lazarus can be yours as well.”

John Ortberg, senior pastor at
Menlo Park Presbyterian Church
and author of *Who Is This Man?*

“*God’s Favorite Place on Earth* realigned my heart toward Jesus and His mysterious, confounding, surprising, beautiful ways. It’s not often I learn something new when reading a book, but Frank Viola’s sharp storytelling and insightful interpretation made me hunger for more of the real Jesus. Pick up this book if you need a reversal in your Christian life; it will not disappoint.”

Mary DeMuth, author of *Everything*

“Frank Viola’s pen and voice are consistently both penetrating and trustworthy. Beyond his invitingly beautiful writing skill—which makes reading a joy and provides a sightseeing tour that brings God’s Word into 3-D when he relates narrative passages—I’m grateful for the depth of his themes. Frank probes the ‘deep calls unto deep’ content of the Holy Spirit’s call within the Scriptures and awakens that hunger that must be regularly fed to secure renewal in each of us. *God’s Favorite Place on Earth* is the kind of book I’ve discovered I need to periodically find and read—thereby keeping ‘the fallow ground’ of my own soul plowed, resown, and watered in order to continue fruitfulness and to deepen the root system of my spiritual walk and growth in Christ.”

Pastor Jack Hayford, chancellor of The
King’s University in Los Angeles

“Frank Viola’s *God’s Favorite Place on Earth* is a fast-moving, groundbreaking look at the Christian’s struggle against legalism, discouragement, doubt, rejection, and spiritual complacency. Told through the voice of Lazarus, the narrative is intellectually gripping and emotionally touching. This is a masterfully engaging book that distills the vision of the Christian life into one focused quest: to be God’s favorite place on earth today. I recommend this little volume to all Christians

and Christian leaders. It brings several familiar gospel stories to life in a fresh and compelling way.”

Mark Batterson, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Circle Maker*

“Out of the rubble of the crumbling religion of Christendom is arising a new tribe of kingdom revolutionaries who are captivated by a vision of a God and a kingdom that is anchored in the humble, enemy-loving, self-sacrificial love manifested on the cross. And one of the boldest, most insightful, and certainly most creative leaders of this rising movement is Frank Viola. Combining masterful storytelling, historical knowledge, biblical insight, and practical wisdom, Frank artfully uses the Gospels’ depiction of Lazarus and the small town of Bethany to lay out a beautiful and compelling vision of a God who longs to make every human heart and every church ‘His favorite place.’ In the process, Frank prophetically exposes the subtle but all-important difference between hearts that embrace Jesus and hearts that merely appear to do so. It is the difference between the unimpressive town of Bethany, where Jesus was welcomed and worshipped, and the much more impressive Jerusalem, which crucified Him. This is a beautifully written, timely, and prophetic work all would benefit from reading!”

Greg Boyd, pastor and author of
Benefit of the Doubt, *Present Perfect*,
and *The Myth of a Christian Nation*

“A lot of people write books; Frank writes stories, and in this one we once again see why he’s such a master. I’m honored to call him a friend and excited to call him an author I love to read.”

Jon Acuff, *Wall Street Journal*
bestselling author of *Start, Quitter,*
and *Stuff Christians Like*

“As masterly as a Cezanne canvas or a Stravinsky score, Frank Viola surpasses himself in his best book yet—a work of serene, soaring magnificence. Part novel, part biography, part theology, part Bible study, Frank’s imaginative touch and command of prose haiku leaves the reader resolved more than ever to be a Bethany—God’s favorite place on earth.”

Leonard Sweet, professor at Drew
University and George Fox University
and chief contributor to Sermons.com

“My Sunday-school teachers did the best they could, but when I was growing up, the biblical people and accounts were no more than flannel-graph images in my mind. They existed at about the same level as the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny. As I’ve become a student of God’s Word, I’ve fallen in love with the real people who found themselves in the pages of the Bible. I learn so much from their dreams, their failures, and especially

their surrender. Reading *God's Favorite Place on Earth* by Frank Viola, my soul began to burn from chapter one. To delve into Lazarus' heart and thoughts ... I received a beautiful glimpse into the life of Christ on earth. Lazarus' stories make a perfect foundation for God's truth, God's intimacy. I can't wait to share this book!"

Tricia Goyer, *USA Today* bestselling author of thirty-five books, including *The Promise Box*

"Perhaps it's because I work in a creative business, but the idea of 'place' has always been important to me. Where I find inspiration, where I write, or where I take time off matters because I've discovered that *where* I create is the key to *what* I create. In spite of that, and in spite of my PhD in theology, I had never considered the importance of Bethany in the life of Jesus. Frank Viola's new book, *God's Favorite Place on Earth*, helped me understand why that one location meant so much to His life and ministry—and why a loved and valued place can transform yours."

Phil Cooke, media consultant and author of *Unique: Telling Your Story in the Age of Brands and Social Media*

“This book exudes love for Jesus. Its creative format offers an inviting window for valuable meditations on what we can learn about the Lord and our relationship with Him from His life and that of some of His closest friends.”

Craig Keener, professor of New Testament at Asbury Seminary, and author of *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*

“Reading *God’s Favorite Place on Earth* illuminates the story of Jesus in such a new and captivating way that it’s bound to impact your life. Read this powerful book and reconnect with the Lord’s heart for every Christian, every church, and every city.”

Pete Wilson, pastor and author of *Plan B* and *Empty Promises*

“*God’s Favorite Place on Earth* is engaging fiction, poetry, theology, and devotion all put under one cover. The book brings new insight and perspective to Jesus and His most intimate friends—Lazarus, Mary, and Martha—with creative language that is beautiful and inspiring. It’s emotionally moving and brings the reader back into the Gospels as an observer, addressing some of our deepest struggles as Christians in the process.”

Anne Marie Miller, author of *Mad Church Disease*, speaker, and blogger

“In the scope of the biblical story, weren’t Lazarus, Martha, and Mary just minor figures living in a unimportant village? That’s certainly what I assumed until Frank Viola showed me what I had been missing. With a mix of creative narrative and pastoral insight, Viola reveals what these friends of Jesus meant to Him—and what that means for us.”

Joe Carter, editor at The Gospel Coalition and The Action Institute

“Frank Viola is a powerful storyteller. The story in this book changed Frank’s life. That’s a powerful statement. After reading the pages of this book, I’m convinced that learning God’s favorite place on earth might just change yours also. Do you need some encouragement? Ever feel rejected in your Christian walk? Read this book!”

Ron Edmondson, pastor and blogger at ronedmondson.com

“More than a devotional, better than an academic study, *God’s Favorite Place on Earth* is a deeply moving pastoral book that will build your faith. Turn its pages slowly, pause between chapters, and allow yourself to be immersed into the world of the New Testament. Prepare yourself for an encounter with Jesus the Galilean—yet the very Son of God.”

David Fitch, B. R. Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary and author of *Prodigal Christianity*

“My friend Frank Viola is one of my favorite authors. He has the rare ability to make theology beautiful and grace delicious and practical. In *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*, Frank teleports you back into the ancient first-century soil of Bethany, Jesus’ favorite place on earth, and a whole new world of grace will unfold like drama right before your eyes. This book will move you to love Jesus more.”

Derwin L. Gray, author of *Limitless Life: You Are Not Your Past When God Holds Your Future*, speaker and pastor

“Frank’s deep love for Jesus abides in every sentence of this unique and beautiful book. He makes the dry bones of the old stories from Sunday school dance with beauty and resurrection power. *God’s Favorite Place* is a call, a challenge, and a love story, all at once.”

Sarah Bessey, author, editor of *A Deeper Story*, and blogger at sarahbessey.com

“Familiar stories scattered in different parts of the Gospels are woven together into one narrative in this innovative work. Fictional elements help bring the events to life, and each chapter concludes with practical teaching to drive home the message that if you choose to welcome Jesus into your life, remarkable

consequences will follow. Frank's refreshing and infectious passion for Jesus permeates every word."

Adrian Warnock, author of *Raised with Christ* and blogger at adrianwarnock.com

"Hold on for a mind-bending, Spirit-honing journey. I've been a fan of Frank's writing for many years now, and this book distills all of the things I love best about his books. Here, for the first time, Frank offers not only great wisdom and theological insight, but also narrative passages to take us back to the sights, sounds, and realities of Jesus' day. We are there at the table with Him in Bethany. We are there at His side when He calls Lazarus from the tomb. To encounter Jesus personally is to be changed forever, and Frank offers that opportunity by taking us to *God's Favorite Place on Earth*."

Eric Wilson, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Fireproof*, *1 Step Away*, and *October Baby*

"Here's an invitation to experience Jesus in a remarkably personal way, through the eyes of His close friend Lazarus. As Lazarus retells 'the old, old story,' we find ourselves there, with him, with his family, with Jesus, watching Jesus at work and enjoying the warmth of His presence and the power of His influence. Frank Viola draws us into a powerful drama very

much at home in the Gospels and faithful to the first-century world, and then he helps us to personalize Jesus' message."

Joel B. Green, PhD Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean for the Center for Advanced Theological Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary

"*God's Favorite Place on Earth* is old school, time-tested wisdom delivered in a highly creative format. I not only hope this book gains a wide reading, but an equal application. I know it spoke to my heart and gently challenged me to follow Jesus ever more closely, to make a Bethany in my heart."

Todd Hunter, Anglican bishop, founder of Churches For the Sake of Others, author of *Our Favorite Sins* and *Christianity Beyond Belief*

"Without question, this is Frank Viola's most exhilarating book yet. Read it to see into the heart of Lazarus. Read it to experience the tenderness of Jesus like never before!"

Dr. Andrew Farley, bestselling author of *The Naked Gospel* and *God Without Religion*

"Frank Viola has a rare gift for helping us all understand the intimate union we share with the Father through Jesus Christ. *God's Favorite Place on Earth* will stir your emotions and

empower you to open yourself to be a ‘Bethany’ where Jesus feels right at home. This is one of those books you’ll read twice and then share with a friend.”

Steve McVey, author of *Grace Walk*

“After reading *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*, I found myself longing to be in each Bethany story with Jesus—tasting the food, smelling the perfume, seeing the man raised, and watching Jesus soar to the heavens. But more so than this desire, I now long to be Bethany to those around me. Thanks, Frank, for helping me see.”

Pete Briscoe, pastor at Bent Tree Bible Fellowship, *Telling the Truth*

“Few authors challenge me in my faith like Frank Viola. This book and the stories it contains will force you to face the myth of religion and instead adopt a life of deeper dedication to God, to find your own Bethany. It sure did for me.”

Jeff Goins, author of *Wrecked*

“Frank Viola’s new book, *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*, couldn’t have reached me at a better time. I’ve been grappling with the pain of being rejected, misunderstood, and judged by other Christians for a few years now. I had no idea how dangerously bitter I’d become. Frank’s book spoke directly into my heart, giving me much-needed perspective on the way God reconciles

these difficult experiences, both in Jesus' life in the flesh and in ours. I realized how I had slipped into the modern church's focus on the self and success and how that set me up to be bitter instead of forgiving, cynical instead of surrendered. I had forgotten that God's greatest work comes in and through my weakness and brokenness. This book is a timely and poignant reminder, through the story of Jesus' life and His one safe place, of the way God can redeem the pain of rejection by fellow believers and do amazing things through our own weakness when we embrace our brokenness and surrender to God."

Joy Bennett, writer, editor, and
blogger at joyinthisjourney.com

"God's Favorite Place on Earth invites you to discover in a fresh way God's desire to live in close relationship. Many struggle today from self-doubt and discouragement. They feel stress at home, school, and work. This book invites you into the life and experience of Lazarus and his small village of Bethany. In an easy-to-read and creative way, Viola tells the story of Lazarus and why Jesus, as God with us, found Bethany as His favorite place on earth. This journey ends with a compelling vision for believers to become God's Bethany to their own communities. This book will inspire all who read it."

Bruxy Cavey, teaching pastor at The Meeting
House and author of *The End of Religion*

“The best thing I can say about Frank Viola is this: when I read his books—and I read them all—I don’t think much about Frank Viola. I think about Jesus. And I learn to love Him more. This book is no different. Read it, and if you’re like me, you’ll find yourself thinking, ‘I knew Jesus was great, but ... Wow!’ And that, at least from me, is as good as it gets.”

Brant Hansen, radio personality and blogger

“Do you know what it feels like to be rejected? Do you long for the chance to start over in life? Do you yearn to find someone worthy of the love you have to give? Then take a walk with Frank Viola to the town of Bethany to meet a family you’ll feel right at home with. And to meet their friend Jesus for the first time all over again.”

Sean Gladding, author of *The Story of God, the Story of Us*

“As you read these pages I predict that you, like me, will receive a fresh vision to ‘follow hard after God’ as David did. I also predict that you’ll receive new prophetic vision as to what Jesus wants for us, His church.”

Steve Sjogren, author, church planter, and pastor

“*God’s Favorite Place on Earth* illuminates the town of Bethany, welcoming us to visit and, in doing so, gain a powerful and irreplaceable picture of our Lord. Viola effortlessly weaves together a compelling narrative with practical wisdom, offering a fresh, imaginative, and exciting new vision of Jesus Christ, while also challenging our thinking to make room for this new revelation of an incredibly intimate and altogether real Christ.”

Nicole Cottrell, blogger at modernreject.com

“The insights of this book are profound for someone seeking a clear understanding of Jesus’ character. More than that, it’s a compelling display of Christ’s human depth that is uncommon to traditional Christian literature.”

Dale Partridge, CEO at Sevenly.org

“In Frank’s new book, *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*, through the power of fictional story and eye-opening life applications, we see Bethany, the physical place where Jesus retreated while on earth. But Bethany is more than just a historical city. The parallels and message Viola reveals is powerful. I hope your heart is touched like mine was. May we all strive daily to be a Bethany.”

Melissa K. Norris, novelist, newspaper columnist, speaker, author of *Pioneering Today*, and blogger at melissaknorris.com

“I have often been haunted by Paul’s reflections in 2 Corinthians 11 that we put up with ‘another Jesus’ way too easily as we slide away from the moorings of simple devotion in a cultural milieu that, as Frank says in his introduction, causes us to battle ‘doubt, discouragement, fear, guilt, division, rejection, and the struggle against consumerism and lukewarmness.’ In our attempts to follow Jesus in such a hostile environment, we often lose sight of who He really is. Frank Viola does a marvelous job of getting our eyes back on Jesus and the gospel narrative through the eyes of one of His dearest friends, Lazarus, and the surprising beauty and safety of the place where he lived, Bethany. A truly unique vision of Jesus unfolds in this well written and beautifully told story. I believe Frank’s efforts here will go a long way in keeping us from embracing ‘another Jesus,’ ‘another Spirit,’ and ‘another gospel.’”

David Ruis, pastor, musician, and
blogger at davidruis.com

“In *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*, Frank Viola invites us into the little village of Bethany to experience Jesus anew through the eyes of Lazarus. Together we discover that the world has not really changed much and that meeting Jesus has the same transformational impact two thousand years after His first visit to Lazarus’ home. It’s challenging and encouraging to uncover the power of grace again for the first time.”

Geoff Surratt, speaker, author, consultant,
and director of Exponential

“Frank Viola’s creative narrative, engaging discussion, and insightful commentary on Jesus’ association with the village of Bethany spoke to my heart, challenged my lifestyle, and fed my soul.”

David Lamb, associate professor of
Old Testament at Biblical Seminary
and author of *God Behaving Badly*

“When He wasn’t teaching, healing, and sowing the seeds of God’s New Creation ecology, where on earth did Jesus go to just be Himself? He went to Bethany, an unassuming village containing remarkable relationships—a space where Jesus could simply *be*. With the pen of a seasoned storyteller, Frank Viola brings Lazarus back to life again to tell us the story of *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*—a ‘Bethany’ that’s not only a historical place in time but a hospitable haven for the living Christ that can be born in every heart, home, church, and village today. This is a must-read that nourishes heart and mind—you’ll want to get extras to give to friends!”

Mike Morrell, journalist and
blogger at mikemorrell.org

“This book fastened my heart and mind on Jesus Christ. I count it as Frank Viola’s best work. His passion for and love of Jesus Christ are on full display. But more importantly, Jesus

Christ is on full display. The setting is Bethany, a little village atop the Mount of Olives. The story is told by Lazarus. It is powerful and moving. Be prepared to step into the story, to take a place in Bethany and encounter Jesus like never before.”

Bob Christopher, host of People to People Radio and author of *Love Is*

“In *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*, Frank Viola creatively brings forth powerful and practical truths through the incarnate life of Christ. Jesus loved all whom He encountered, and yet like us, He had special relationships that brought Him much joy. God’s special place called ‘Bethany’ is a place where real life, real relationships, and transformational experiences happen. As Bethany comes alive in your own heart as you read this book, you will find encouragement, revelatory insight, and strength for your journey.”

Robert Ricciardelli, founder of
Converging Zone Network

“The heart of the Christian faith is not simply allegiance to a book or obedience to a set of rules. Instead it is a profound transaction with Jesus Christ. Frank Viola retells the tale of two sisters and a brother who encounter Christ within both their ordinary existence in a small village and their human drama of suffering, life, and death. With the skill of a compassionate

preacher and skillful teacher, Viola draws from the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus life lessons that will lead the reader to his or her own life-changing encounter with the King of Kings—Christ the Lord.”

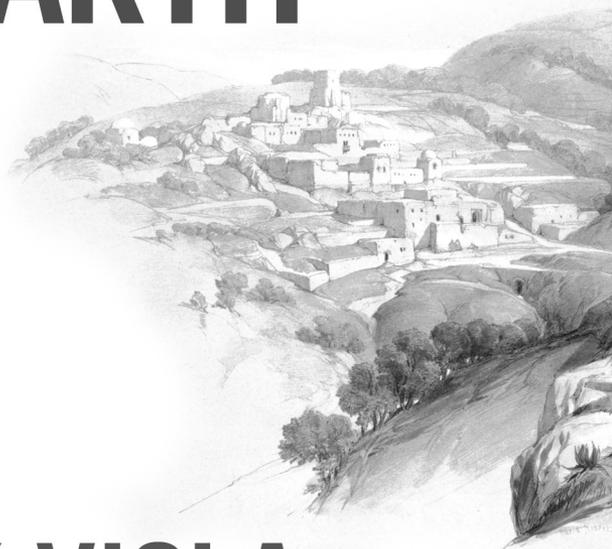
Dwight Longenecker, Catholic priest, author of *The Quest for the Creed* and *The Romance of Religion*, and award-winning blogger, speaker, and retreat leader

“There could not be anything more human than to have a home, a home close to the heart, a favorite place to just be. Viola strikes deep emotional chords in reminding us in a new way that God became flesh in Christ Jesus, that the city of Bethany was *God’s Favorite Place on Earth*. All I can say as I read this touching story is, ‘Yes, Jesus had a home. Jesus was human.’ Every pastor, Sunday-school teacher, and Bible-study leader looking for a fresh way to reach people with the story of the incarnation will find here an exciting new approach. It is the story of Jesus through the biographical eyes of Lazarus wrapped in a teaching method. Brilliant!”

Brett Blair, president and founder of Sermons.com

For more information, including the video trailer, go to GodsFavoritePlace.com

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FRANK VIOLA

David©Cook®
transforming lives together

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For Bible credits, see page 206.

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Narratives anchor people to a unified vision.

*May this book give you a unified vision
that will govern the rest of your life.*

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INTRODUCING AN AMAZING VILLAGE

In every generation, Christians face the same challenges—namely doubt, discouragement, fear, guilt, division, rejection, and the struggle against consumerism and complacency.

The Gospels narrate the incredible story of Jesus' earthly life. Yet there is a story within this narrative that's often missed. And to my mind, it's the greatest story never told—a narrative within the narrative.

That narrative is the story of Jesus' repeated visits to the little village of Bethany.

When we extract the story of Bethany from the four Gospels and trace the footsteps of our Lord there, a beautiful saga emerges. This saga speaks to the challenges of doubt, discouragement, fear, guilt, division, rejection, consumerism, and spiritual apathy. Challenges we all face as believers.

GOD'S FAVORITE PLACE ON EARTH

My object in this book is to tell the story of Bethany and bring its powerful message to life. The reason? *Because that narrative changed my life.* And I'm hopeful that it will change yours also.

This book is a work of biblical narrative. The Gospels give us the meat of the story of Bethany, but I've filled in the details by creating dialogue, action, and atmosphere. These details add color and texture to the story. They transform the story into vivid 3D Technicolor, unearthing uncommon insights from the biblical text.

Note that I've drawn the creative details from first-century history. As such, they are fully consistent with the biblical record and New Testament scholarship.

Even so, this isn't a scholarly work. As a result, different possibilities derived from the biblical data are deliberately left out. My narration is according to what I consider to be the best research available.

According to the Gospels, four main characters lived in Bethany: Martha; her sister, Mary; and their brother, Lazarus. A person named "Simon the leper" also lived there.

Some people may think that Jerusalem is God's favorite place on earth. And in a sense they are correct. Jerusalem is central in the Bible. It is where God put His name and where He chose to presence Himself in the temple.

When Jesus arrived on the scene, however, the holy city of Jerusalem became something that God never intended. And it

rejected its Savior. So much so that it crucified Him. The tears of Jesus over Jerusalem, therefore, were not tears of satisfaction and joy. They were tears of sorrow for rejecting its Messiah. In the following pages I will demonstrate that the place where Jesus Christ—God incarnate—was happiest, the most satisfied, and felt most at home was Bethany. It is in this sense that I am using the phrase “favorite place.”

In the pages that follow, Lazarus will tell the story in six parts. Following each frame of the story, a “walking it out” section will practically apply some of the crucial points of the narrative that bear on our lives today. The book concludes with a “talking it over” section to help guide discussions for churches and small groups.

As you read the incomparable story of Jesus in Bethany, I expect the profound significance of what our Lord did in this village to come to life for you. And when you are finished, I hope you will discover the meaning of God’s favorite place on earth.

Chapter 1

APPRECIATING BETHANY

It's been more than thirty years since I met Him. The day He first entered our home is etched in my mind forever. I shall never forswear those memories.

My sisters, Mary and Martha, are no longer with us. Neither is my father, Simon, whom Jesus healed of leprosy.

Most of the Teacher's close disciples, all of whom I had the privilege of knowing, have rendered their lives for His Name's sake.

A number of them committed to the written page their own encounters with Him. Words that I've read and consider to be God-breathed.

Since I am not sure how much longer I have left on this earth, I wish to leave behind the story of the times Jesus came to my hometown, Bethany, and of all the people He forever changed while He was here.



The One who lived before the earth existed spent only thirty-three years on the planet. And God gave me the unique honor of sharing some of those years with Him.

I did not know it at the time, but the Galilean prophet was rejected everywhere He went. When I discovered this, the irony dawned on me.

Here was the God of the universe, clothed in human flesh, turned down, cast away, refused in nearly every quarter in which He stepped.

The Creator was rejected by His own creation.

When He was born, Bethlehem closed its doors to Him. So He came into the world in the place where animals were fed.

Luke always had an eye for detail. In his recent narrative about the Savior, he wrote,

And she gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.¹

But that's not all. When He was two years old the government hunted Him down like an animal. Consider it. The

Son of God—a mere child—treated like a dangerous creature unworthy of breath. Matthew recounted the sad ordeal:

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.²

When He began His public ministry, He was rejected by His own people—*my people*—the Jews.

John set it forth this way in his account:

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.³

Jesus was despised, rejected, and belittled by the Jewish elite who dominated Jerusalem. They eventually colluded with the Romans and put Him to death. Yet with gripping pain and sorrow, He still loved the city that betrayed Him. Matthew rehearsed His prayer in his narrative:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather

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your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.⁴

When He sought entrance into the despised region of Samaria, the Samaritans rejected Him also. Luke told the story, saying,

And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.⁵

He was even rejected by His own hometown, Nazareth, the place where He grew up. Mark captured the scene in his gospel:

“Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”⁶

Here was the earth's Creator. The One who made all things and for whom all things were made ... unwelcomed by the very world that came from His hand.

I'm reduced to tears every time I think about it; there was only one exception to this widespread rejection.

Throughout His short time on earth, my sisters and I determined that there would be one place where Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, would be welcomed.

A little village called Bethany.

My hometown.

God's favorite place on earth.

Let me tell you the story ...

Chapter 4

ANOINTED IN BETHANY

Living after you have died is strange.

You appreciate life like never before. Martha's lentil soup never tasted so good. Even the capers, which I had never relished, were suddenly exquisite.

It had been months since Jesus brought me back to the realm of the living. And as was His custom, the Teacher visited us once again on His way to Jerusalem.

We did not know it at the time, but this visit would mark the last week of His earthly life.

That entire week, He would visit the holy city in the day and retreat in the evening to our home, where He and His disciples lodged overnight.

GOD'S FAVORITE PLACE ON EARTH

When we received word that Jesus was coming, my father decided to host a private dinner party to celebrate my resurrection. Jesus would be the guest of honor.

As usual, Martha served as hostess and Mary assisted.

Before the banquet began, Martha insisted that I sit next to Jesus, which I gladly did. My father sat at the head of the table with Jesus at his right hand in the place of honor.

Our house was packed to the brim that evening. Voices rose to the roof. Bright colors of clothing dotted the public room. Some of our closest friends were present, including relatives from Bethany and Jerusalem. It was a reunion of everyone we held dear.

The dinner party was held six days before Passover. And Jesus brought all of His disciples.

“Welcome!” my father boomed, greeting each person as they arrived. His eyes brightened with excitement. “You know my daughters, and you are in for a real feast tonight!”

Jesus complimented Martha’s cooking as usual. “Your flat-bread has no rival, Martha,” said the Teacher.

Martha and Mary prepared an elaborate feast. A large plate of mixed meats was placed on the table. Another plate featured assorted vegetables with fish, turnips, beans, and a delicious brine sauce. Aged wine was also served.

We arranged two clusters of three couches around the table. Jesus, my father, some of the Teacher’s disciples, and

I reclined around the low table, propping ourselves on cushions. The rest of the party sat on stools and benches in the open space in front of the table.

We all ate together, and Martha served.

Jesus was more solemn than usual that night. I kept watching Him while we ate, and He seemed to be deep in thought much of the time. His mouth pulled downward.

Near the end of the meal, I caught a whiff of an exotic scent. Others could smell it too, but none of us knew from where it came.

With dramatic suddenness, I looked down and saw my sister Mary kneeling at Jesus' feet. She snapped the narrow neck of a flask containing nard from India. The nard was an enormously expensive fragrance, worth the financial equivalent of three hundred days of labor.

Before her passing, my mother gave the nard to Mary as a gift. Mary was only seven years old then. One pound of the exotic perfume was sealed in a beautiful flask of alabaster. Candlelight flickered over the white jar.

I was shocked because this was Mary's future security.

The house fell silent as we fixed our gaze on Mary. What was she doing at Jesus' feet?

After breaking the fragile seal, Mary poured the nard on the Teacher's head. She did so liberally and profusely. So much so that it ran down His beard, droplets beading down over the fine hairs.

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She removed His sandals and poured the rest of the nard on His feet, anointing them with it. She wiped them with her long black hair.

The immaculate head that would soon wear a crown of thorns was first crowned with the exquisite scent of my sister's perfume. Mary's flask of alabaster was the tangible token of the thankful outpouring and willing surrender of her heart.

The nard was, very simply, the most treasured possession she owned.

Mary had saved the nard for years. But the hour ripened for her to use it in a way that no mortal could predict.

I watched Jesus and a subtle smile streamed across His face. The fragrant beauty of Mary's act touched Him with quiet joy.

The Lord who had wept with my sisters at my tomb now rejoiced with us at our table.

The scent of the perfume, now completely exhausted on the Teacher, silently flooded the room.

The pleasant aroma matched the spiritual fragrance of my sister's act. And it left an indelible mark upon all of us. Especially Jesus.

Martha looked on with mild surprise. I saw tears running down her face as Mary anointed Jesus with the perfume.

At that moment, it dawned on me how much Martha had changed. She was still serving, but not anxiously. She was still hospitable, but no longer distracted. But even more than this,

she had begun to understand the love that our sister had for the Teacher. And she affirmed it in her actions.

The sight of Mary unbinding her hair arrested the room. To those who did not understand what she was doing, it was a scandal. Some of our relatives glowered at her. Others recoiled in horror.

Embarrassment was written on the faces of some of the Teacher's disciples.

But to those who understood Mary, it was an act of extravagant love.

I glanced over at John. His eyes welled up with tears. The other disciples seemed irritated. A few of them turned their heads.

I have no words to adequately describe the sweetness of Mary's act that day. I knew my sister well, and she was motivated by the ardent love she had for the Teacher. It was a visible exhibit of unselfish worship and heartfelt devotion, a supreme tribute of her pure affection for Him.

None of us realized it at the time, but Mary outshined all the other disciples in her grasp of the Lord's worth as well as His imminent death.

Somehow she knew that the One who had raised me from the dead would soon take His own place in the tomb.

Years later I would reflect on this incident, remembering how Jesus would often tell us how He would be taken by the Gentiles

and led to die. We did not understand what He was speaking about. But my sister, with her sensitive heart, understood.



Weeks before, Jesus had consoled Mary in the hour of her grief. Now she consoled Him in the only way she knew how.

She anointed His head with the fragrant balm—the same way kings were anointed.

My father and I looked on with silent wonder and secret awe as Mary performed her beautiful act of devotion upon the Teacher.

Neither Jesus nor Mary spoke any words.

We quickly realized, however, that some of the Teacher's disciples did not have the same opinion.

Judas leveled a cold-hearted censure on my sister's act of worship:

“To what purpose was this waste? It could have been sold and given to the poor!” he chided.

I could hear some of the other disciples bristling in agreement with Judas' cutting criticism. They seemed infuriated. Mary's beautiful offering had been grossly misjudged.

When Judas finished, there was silence. Mary did not register an emotion. Her expression remained the same—her eyes still downcast.

Then, with quiet dignity, Jesus upbraided them all, saying, “Leave her alone! Why are you troubling her? She has performed a good deed for Me.”

Jesus paused. He looked at Mary and continued, “She has saved this perfume for the day of My burial. The poor will always be with you, and you can help them whenever you desire. But you won’t always have Me. I tell you the truth, wherever in the world this gospel is proclaimed, what she has done today will also be rehearsed in her memory.”

The Teacher knew exactly what Mary had done. Even beyond what she herself perceived.

In light of her beautiful act of worship, Jesus would allow no complaint. He would brook no criticism. Sharply and sternly, He defended my sister, openly rebuking the unjust charge.

Years later John told me that it wasn’t Judas’ care for the poor, but his greed that provoked his criticism that evening. Judas was the treasurer for the disciples, and the love of money had overtaken him.

But Judas’ words betrayed him. He was a man with a cold heart and a closed hand. He did not recognize the worth of the Teacher, nor did he pay allegiance to Him.

His was the bitter complaint of a hypocrite.

Yet my sister’s stunning act brought joy to the heart of the Savior. Even so, I could tell by her sad demeanor that Judas’

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remark cut her to the quick. But as was fitting for her character, Mary uttered no word in defense.

I was relieved when Jesus defended her. And I was honored when He said that her good deed would be remembered wherever the gospel would be proclaimed.

Shortly after Jesus finished speaking, a large crowd from Jerusalem arrived at our home. They heard that Jesus was visiting us, and they wanted to see Him (and me, whom He raised from the dead).



Our home smelled of the fragrance for days. When Mary poured the perfume upon the Teacher, some of it splashed on the table. And it even left a stain.

In the days to come, many of the Jews in Jerusalem believed in the Teacher because of the seismic miracle He performed on me.

But the chief priests, led by Caiaphas, were so threatened that they hatched a plot to put me to death. I was a living witness to the resurrection power of Jesus. The priests feared that if the Jews began believing in Him in larger numbers, the Romans would remove their established place in the city. So they wanted me dead to protect their real estate.¹

My sisters and I scrambled to gather my belongings and pack them up. Under the cloak of darkness, I left Bethany in hiding. I went to Bethsaida in Galilee and stayed with the family of Philip—one of the Teacher’s disciples.

Several weeks later, I received word that the Romans had put Jesus to death outside of Jerusalem, and I quickly made my way home.

The journey was long. The smell of donkey dung on the side of the roads filled my nostrils. My body was covered in gritty dust. Eventually, I rounded the corner, and our house in Bethany glimmered in the afternoon sun.

I staggered to the courtyard. Martha’s hand stilled over her mixing bowl. “Lazarus!” she yelled.

My bags dropped to the floor. The sight of her calloused hands undid me. Tears burned my eyes. “They killed Him,” she said.

I wrapped my arms around her. Our tears dripped to the ground.

In the days that followed, we could still smell the fragrance of Mary’s perfume in the house. And whenever we looked at the stain on the table, we remembered.

We remembered all the times He visited our home and how He broke bread with us.

We remembered how Mary wiped His feet with her hair, anointing Him for His soon-approaching burial.

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We remembered the many things He taught us before He visited the holy city one last time.

We remembered ... and we wept.

But what happened next was the most surprising of all ...

THE SACRED TEXT

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived (the man whom Jesus raised from the dead). There at Bethany they prepared dinner for him at the home of Simon the leper. Martha was serving, and Lazarus was one of those eating with him.

Then Mary took an alabaster jar of expensive ointment (a pound of pure nard) and came up to him as he reclined at the table. She broke the jar and poured the ointment over his head. She anointed his feet and wiped his feet with her hair. The house soon was filled with the aroma of the ointment.

When his disciples saw what she did, [they] soon became indignant and said to themselves, “Why is this ointment being wasted? This could have been sold for a considerable amount of money.” So they began to rebuke her. Judas Iscariot (who would later betray him) said, “Why wasn’t this ointment sold for a year’s wages, and the money given to the poor?” He didn’t say this because he was at all concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief and had charge of the money pouch and kept stealing what was put into it.

Jesus was aware of all this and said to them, “Leave her alone. Why are you bothering the woman? She has done a good thing for me. She has saved this ointment for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you and can help them whenever you want, but you won’t always have me. She has done what she could. In pouring out this ointment she has anointed my body for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever in the world this good news is proclaimed, what this woman has done will also be recounted in memory of her.”

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Many of the Jews who knew he was there came not only because of Jesus but because they wanted to see Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. That is why the chief priests discussed how they might also kill Lazarus. On account of him a large number of Jews were leaving them and believing in Jesus.

—Matt. 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, and John 12:1–11²

WALKING IT OUT

*What has stripped the seeming beauty
From the idols of the earth?
Not a sense of right or duty,
But the sight of peerless worth.*

In this story, we have a matchless picture of what Bethany is all about.

A banquet was given in honor of Jesus, and there was feasting, fellowship, and rejoicing. The banquet was set in the home of Simon the leper (which was also the home of Martha). Even though Simon no longer had leprosy, he still carried a stigma.

Yet Jesus received him.

God's house is made up of cleansed lepers. That's what we all are. We were inflicted with the dastardly disease of spiritual leprosy, an apt metaphor for sin. And Jesus Christ cleansed us.

But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.³

Lazarus was also present—a resurrected man. God's house is made up of resurrected humans as well.

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Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [He] made us alive together with Christ ...⁴

Martha acted according to character. She was serving, but she was not worried or troubled as she had been before. Why? Because Martha was serving in resurrection.

Something had changed in her. You cannot be around Jesus Christ for very long without changing. His presence transforms.

In the past, Martha had served in her flesh. But on this night she served in the Spirit. She was not worried, troubled, or distracted. She served her Lord without complaint, without the need to be noticed or exonerated. She wasn't anxious about what others were doing or not doing. Her service was in proportion to her fellowship, and she was free.

Diligence is a wonderful trait. But it must go through death and resurrection for it to be properly adjusted and used by the Lord. This is what happened to Martha.

Mary also acted according to character. For the third time, she was at the Lord's feet.

She was at His feet in gladness, drinking in His words.⁵ She was at His feet in sorrow, pouring out her grief.⁶ And she was at His feet in worship, lavishing her love upon Him.⁷

Mary knew those feet well.

Put all of this together and step back. What do you see?

Cleansed lepers, resurrected humans, transformed servants, extravagant worshippers, brothers, sisters, fathers, and disciples all sitting around a table where Christ is the Head—feasting, fellowshiping, and rejoicing with Him.

That is Bethany!

Anointed for Burial

I want you to see the table. Jesus is reclining there.

Mary brings in a sealed flask of precious perfume. It's spikenard, an eastern perfume with a potent fragrance. It comes from the root of the nard plant found on the mountains of northern India.

It is obscenely expensive perfume, not oil—a luxury that few people could afford and enjoy in that day. Spikenard was used for burial rites as well as for cosmetic and romantic purposes. And it was virtually always used in small quantities.

Mary breaks open the seal and pours out the perfume upon the Lord's head, anointing Him as though He were a king. As the perfume drips down His body and reaches His feet, she anoints His feet with the perfume as though she is a slave and He is her master.

Jesus interprets the act as preparation for His burial, something very important to first-century Jews. He invites those in the room to view Mary's outrageous gesture as a

symbolic embalming. She is anointing Him as one would a corpse.

Mary anointed Him for burial.

Anointing a dead body with spices and ointment was done in preparation for entombment. The perfume would conceal the smell of the decaying corpse. It was as if Mary understood that the Lord wouldn't be with them much longer, almost without realizing that she understood.

Mary perceived that her king was going to die. The kings of Judah were anointed before their coronations. Not by women, but by male prophets. In this case, Mary took on the role of a prophet.

Anointing a person's feet was also done to bring comfort and refreshment to them in a day when their feet were weary from travel. Mary's loving gesture of lowly devotion would comfort Jesus before His trial of pain.

The Unfathomable Worth of Christ

Consider the value of this perfume. It was worth three hundred denarii. A denarius was a day's wage for the average worker in the first century.⁸ Three hundred denarii is one year's salary. Let me put this in contemporary terms so you can feel the force of it.

At the time of this writing, the average annual income in America is approximately fifty thousand dollars. So the value

of that flask of perfume was the equivalent of fifty thousand dollars.

Mary probably received the perfume as a family heirloom. It represented her savings, her future, her security. It could have been sold in case of a financial crisis.

With that thought in mind, I'd like to make three observations about Mary's extravagant act:

(1) Mary recognized the supreme worth of the Lord Jesus

Mary took that which was most precious to her, and she gave it to her Lord. Not just some of it. But *all* of it. She poured the *entire* contents of the flask ... one Roman pound of undiluted nard ... upon Jesus. A Roman pound is close to twelve ounces.

I'm impressed that Mary saved this precious perfume for Christ. Even when her own brother died, she didn't use it for his burial. Instead, she kept it as a treasured gift for her Lord.

The shadow of the cross hovered over the banquet. By instinctive love and intuitive foresight, Mary knew that Jesus wasn't going to be with the family much longer. Thus her act was in perfect season.

It was an elegant picture of extravagant worship, extravagant loyalty, extravagant love, and extravagant devotion. And it was precious in the Lord's sight.

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Jesus prized Mary's love and faith in a special way. He gave her act a deathless fame that would spread everywhere the gospel was preached. Her good work won His warmest praise, being rewarded with a renown that was beyond the legacy of kings. And in the face of abrasive criticism, Jesus defended and commended Mary with words of matchless beauty and tenderness.

Recall what Paul said in Philippians 3:8:

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

In Bethany, Jesus Christ is valued for His exceeding worth. In Bethany, there is nothing too costly to lay at His feet. In Bethany, all things are counted as loss for the excellent knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord.

But even more, the way that Mary anointed Jesus was scandalous. It was shameful for a woman to unbind her hair in public with men present. It denoted loose morals and was guaranteed to raise pious eyebrows.

Mary of Bethany's anointing shouldn't be confused with a previous anointing by a "sinful woman" in Luke 7. There are too many discrepancies to view it as the same event, including

the location, the people involved, the way the anointing was done, and the time at which the event took place.

In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that Mary of Bethany was a sinful woman. Quite the contrary.

Perhaps Mary heard of the woman who had anointed Jesus in the past and was inspired by the idea. This is quite possible. (The post-apostolic Christians believed the sinful woman was Mary Magdalene, though this cannot be proven or disproven.)

Regardless of whether Mary heard about the previous anointing or not, she was taking a profound risk by unbinding her hair in public. A risk that demonstrated that she didn't care what others thought about her worship.

At bottom, Mary's stunning act wasn't motivated by the things that often govern spiritual service today, such as guilt, duty, obligation, the desire to impress others, the thrill of being appreciated, and the need to satisfy restlessness.

No, she performed this shameless gesture for an Audience of One. Her eyes had been opened to see the supreme value of Jesus Christ. And the Lord defended and commended her for it.

(2) Mary shattered the flask

The shattering of the alabaster flask signifies excessive use wherein nothing was saved. Once opened, the flask could not be resealed.

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John wanted his readers to know that when the flask was broken, the house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. Herein lies a great spiritual principle:

When the vessel is broken, the fragrance of Christ pours forth.

This brings us back to the matter of brokenness that we discussed in chapter 1. The alabaster cruse was beautiful and expensive. But it had to be broken in order for the sweet perfume to be released and the scent enjoyed.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.⁹

Brokenness is a mark of the spiritual history of the Lord's choicest servants. Our lives can only become fragrant with the Lord's life when we've experienced the inner depths of brokenness. When something has been broken within us, something of God—who dwells in our spirits—is released, and the scent cannot be missed.

Charles Spurgeon rightly said that the jewels of the Christian are his or her afflictions. When people allow the Lord to break them and when they waste themselves upon Christ, those who come near them can sense the fragrance of His life.

There is nothing more precious on the face of this earth than a gathering of believers in whom the Lord feels at home.

Whenever that takes place, there is an issuing forth of the aroma of Christ's presence that can be detected by those who visit. It is the aroma of lives fully yielded to Jesus, poured out and wasted upon Him.



In the Messianic prophecy of Psalm 45, we are told that the Lord's garments smelled of myrrh and aloes. Before Jesus was buried, Nicodemus placed myrrh and aloes on His body. And he used the same amount that was used for royal burials—a hundred pounds worth.¹⁰ By this act, Nicodemus testified that he believed Jesus to be a king.

Now think with me. In addition to the perfume that Mary poured upon Him, the Lord's body was covered with a hundred pounds of fragrant spices. So when He rose from the dead a few days later, He was fragrant. And His fragrance could be smelled from afar.

Point: the resurrected Christ has a scent. He emits the everlasting fragrance of resurrection.

Now we cannot physically smell Christ today, but our spiritual senses can detect the fragrance of His presence among us.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.¹¹

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The sense of smell is the most delicate of all the human senses. By it, we receive impressions beyond our sight and hearing. Fragrance cannot be hidden. It's pervasive. When released, the fragrant influence of Jesus Christ cannot be hidden.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.¹²

As A. B. Simpson once put it, "Preaching without spiritual aroma is like a rose without fragrance. We can only get the perfume by getting more of Christ."

(3) Mary was criticized by Judas

This story contains the only sermon that Judas ever preached. Listen to his three-word protest.

"Why this waste?"

When Judas saw Mary's worshipful act, he exploded with criticism, saying, "Why are you being so wasteful? You could have helped the poor with this small fortune!"

But Mary stepped out in faith. Her act of extravagant love was shameless, selfless, and risked both embarrassment and the sneers and jeers of harsh criticism.

But love compelled her.

However, her act was rudely interrupted by a mean-spirited complaint. Her token of exquisite devotion exposed her own heart and the heart of Judas as well as the other disciples who agreed with him.

Judas sought to cloak the real motive behind his complaint with pious rhetoric. It was a case of cold-heartedness judging warm-heartedness under the guise of being spiritual.

Unfortunately, Judas is not alone in engaging in this behavior.

There are few things that are as close to God's heart as helping the dispossessed and oppressed. Read your Old Testament. It's spilling over with God's concern for their plight.

Jesus Himself was a poor man all His life. The poor were His representatives, not His rivals.

But as important as caring for the poor is, Jesus Christ Himself is even more important. He is more valuable than any ministry, no matter how good or noble.

As we observed in chapter 1, it is possible to worship the god of "ministry" in place of Christ.

Interestingly, the Lord's death, which Mary highlighted by her anointing, would eventually solve the problem of poverty forever.

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The contrast between Mary and Judas is dramatic. In Mary, we see the light of love. In Judas, we see the darkness of sin. Mary anointed Jesus for burial; Judas prepared Him for betrayal. Mary loved Christ in preparation for His death; Judas helped bring about His death.

I'm comforted to know that Jesus is an advocate to all who give Him the place of preeminence. He rises to the defense of every Mary.

While Mary was misunderstood and denigrated, she never justified, defended, or explained herself. Though she only speaks once in the Gospels, the legacy of her life speaks volumes by her actions.

For these reasons, Mary came closer to Jesus' inner heart than anyone else.

And her loving act is one case among several where a woman got it right while the men got it wrong.

Every disciple of Christ has much to learn from Mary.

Why This Waste?

What you give to Christ equals the measure of His worth in your eyes.

The worth of Jesus is immeasurable. It cannot be calculated. And nothing is too valuable for Him. Mary understood this.

Aware of the criticism that was leveled against her, Jesus said, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.”¹³

The Lord was simply saying, “I am worth far more than the value of this perfume. The poor will always be present, and you can help them whenever you desire. But you will not always have Me with you in the flesh.”

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.¹⁴

What is waste? It is giving more than necessary. Waste is when you give a diamond to a dog. It is when you give something valuable to that which is inferior in worth. When something of value could be better spent elsewhere, we call it waste.

What Judas and the others were really saying was,
“The Lord isn’t worth it.”

Mark it down. Whenever you give that which is most valuable in your life to the Lord Jesus Christ, some of your fellow Christians will consider it to be waste.

“Why aren’t you going to college to prepare for a career? Instead you foolishly chose to give your full attention and time with that group of Christians. Why are you wasting your youth?”

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“Why did you break up with that person? They had a great job, and you could have had a wonderful future with them. You forfeited that relationship just because they weren't as ‘religious’ as you are. Why are you wasting your future?”

“Why did you sell your house and move to a smaller house simply to get involved with that ministry? Why are you wasting your money?”

“Why did you quit your job and relocate to be involved with that church? You now have a lower-paying job. Why are you wasting your life?”

“Why did you use your stock dividends for that work of God? Why are you wasting your savings?”

Whenever you hear the complaint, “Why this waste?” examine it carefully and consider whether you're hearing the gospel of Judas or not.

If you are, then the Lord's response where you are concerned is:

“Let him alone ...”

“Let her alone ...”

“He is doing a beautiful thing to Me.”

“She is doing a beautiful thing to Me.”

What some regard to be waste is beautiful in the Lord's eyes.

The truth is: *the only way to keep yourself from wasting your life is to waste it on Jesus Christ!*

Thus the answer to the question, “Why this waste?” is simply ... “because Christ is worthy.”

Watchman Nee once said that the Lord will never be satisfied without our “wasting” ourselves upon Him, and “real usefulness in the hand of God is measured in terms of waste.... [O]ur work for him springs out of our ministering to him.”

Jesus was given costly gifts when He entered into this world.¹⁵ And He was given a costly gift when He was about to exit it.¹⁶ Today, He is still worthy of our best. And it is still costly to anoint the head of Christ.

I believe the Lord has His crosshairs sighted on something in all of our lives—whatever we hold dearest.

Your mind may immediately go to a person who has become a rival for your affections for Jesus. Or it may go to some vice that you know you need to abandon. But the more subtle competitors are actually spiritual things.

We’ve already mentioned that some make “Christian service” a god that competes with Jesus Christ. On that score, Henri Nouwen said that the main obstacle to love for God is service for God.

But another competitor is theology. It’s possible to make theology our god instead of God Himself. We can love theology more than we love God.

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The same is true for worship, believe it or not. It's possible to love the act of singing worship and praise songs to the Lord more than we love the Lord Himself.

It's possible to love arguing on behalf of God (apologetics), evangelizing for God, preaching about God, writing about God, and studying God (analyzing the Bible) more than loving God Himself.

All of these things are good, of course. But if they don't lead us to the real person of Christ, they can become idols.

If our hearts are awakened to discover the true worth of Jesus, we will be able to lay all things down at His feet. Herein lies the antidote to being a lukewarm Christian.

Our eyes must be opened to behold His peerless glory. Once that happens, we will realize that nothing is too good for Him, and we will break loose from our spiritual lethargy.

This, in fact, was Paul's great prayer in Ephesians. That God would grant to us "the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him."¹⁷

Many a preacher has tried to guilt God's people out of their lukewarm state, using shame, duty, and condemnation as instruments. But such tools are short-lived.

To see Christ with eyes not physical is the cure for spiritual apathy. So expose yourself to ministries that know how to preach Christ in such glory that you're awed by His greatness

and you're drawn to worship Him. Our alabaster boxes willingly yield at the sight of His peerless worth.

As a friend of mine once said, "The moment He set me free is the moment He captured me."

The House of Figs

Mary anointed Jesus on a Saturday. On Sunday morning, He entered the city of Jerusalem, riding on a colt.¹⁸ The Lamb of God presented Himself publicly in Zion as a humble king.

Before sundown that same day, He left Jerusalem and returned to Bethany, where He lodged.¹⁹

On Monday morning, He left for Jerusalem again. And on the way there, He hungered and saw a fig tree with leaves. Upon closer inspection, He discovered that there were no figs on it.²⁰ Here's what the text says:

As Jesus was returning to Jerusalem from Bethany the next morning, he became hungry. In the distance by the road he saw a fig tree covered with leaves, so he went to find fruit on it. When he reached it, he found only the leaves (it wasn't the right season for figs). So Jesus said to it, "May you bear no fruit from this time onward, and may no one ever eat your fruit again."

His disciples heard him say it. And the fig tree immediately withered. Then they came to Jerusalem, and Jesus went into the

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temple of God and began to drive out everyone who was selling and buying things there ... Then he left them, and when the evening came he left the city and spent the night in Bethany. The next morning they passed by the fig tree and saw that it had dried up from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Master, look! The fig tree you cursed has shriveled up."²¹

A fig tree's leaves typically appear at the same time as its fruit. Thus to see a fig tree covered with leaves but no fruit meant that it was barren.

The tree in this story was a defective tree. And it was bearing a false testimony. It was announcing that it possessed figs (by the fact that it had leaves on it), while it had none. Jesus cursed it, and it withered away.

Note that the Lord didn't curse the fig tree because it was barren. He cursed it because it bore false witness.

The fig tree could not feed the Lord. It produced no figs, so it could not satisfy His heart.

But there was a place that could feed Him. There was a place that could satisfy His heart.

At sundown, Jesus returned to Bethany.²²

And what happened in Bethany? Our Lord was fed. He was cared for. He was loved. And He was satisfied.

Ironically, Bethany means house of figs.

Many scholars agree that the fig tree represents Israel.²³ Like the fig tree that Jesus cursed, Israel put forth an outward

show of religion. But in reality, it was spiritually barren. And it could not satisfy the heart of God.

Israel was supposed to feed our Lord, but it fed itself instead. The nation rejected its Messiah. “He came unto his own and his own received him not.”²⁴ So He cursed the fig tree as an act of judgment, and He declared that it would never yield figs again.

In the Gospels, the cursing of the fig tree is mentioned with the cleansing of the temple. Both were signposts of God’s judgment on Israel and its religion. Israel was like a barren tree, fruitless, and ripe for God’s chastisement.

Each event—the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple—contains the same message. Both were dramatic parables—symbolic actions—of divine displeasure and judgment.

Jesus cleansed the temple sometime after He cursed the fig tree, on Monday. On Tuesday, He went to Jerusalem to speak to the people for the last time. On Wednesday, He tarried in Bethany. On Thursday, He went to Jerusalem, ate the Passover in an upper room, and prayed in agony in the garden of Gethsemane. On Friday He was crucified.

Blessed Are the Unoffended

When Martha complained to Jesus about Mary on His first visit to Bethany, Mary could have chosen to be offended by

her sister. But there is no indication that she felt that way. She also could have taken offense when Judas and the disciples protested against her act of extravagant worship. But again, there is no indication that she did.

Don't make the mistake of underestimating the pain that was inflicted upon Mary in both situations. Here was a woman who loved her Lord with all her heart, and she was unfairly criticized for it. Not by her enemies, but once by her sister and another time by some of the Lord's own disciples.

It reminds me of the old adage, "No good deed shall go unpunished."

The words of Elbert Hubbard come to mind: "To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing."

In both cases, Mary never opened her mouth to defend herself or her actions. In silence, she entrusted the matter to her Lord. And in both instances, Jesus rose to her defense.

Point: there will always be some Christians who will undermine and denigrate your good actions.

T. Austin-Sparks once wrote, "If you get upset, offended, and go off and sulk, and nurse your grievance, you will die."

With that in mind, here are eight things I've learned about being offended by others:

(1) Christians will hurt your feelings

Because of the fall, this will happen.²⁵ Sometimes a person acts with malicious intent, desiring to hurt you because they don't like you or they've *chosen* to be offended by you. Other times they will hurt you without realizing it. I'm sure that when the other disciples chimed in with Judas' complaint, they weren't trying to hurt Mary. It was just the result of fleshly judgment.

(2) When others hurt you, your spiritual maturity will be revealed

You will discover how real your relationship with Jesus Christ is when your feelings get hurt. You can be the greatest speaker, the greatest worshipper, or the greatest evangelist, but when your feelings are hurt, what you do at that moment and afterward will reveal the reality of your relationship with Jesus.

People have one of two reactions when their feelings get hurt: they deal with it before the Lord, or they destroy others. Mary left it in the hands of Christ.

(3) God intends to use mistreatments for our good

Recall the mistreatment that Joseph endured at the hands of his own brothers. Joseph took it from the hand of God, saying, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.”²⁶

Remember King David when Abishai cursed him? David chose not to kill his detractor, but instead he saw the persecution in light of God’s sovereign hand.²⁷

To paraphrase Romans 8:28, everything that comes into our lives, whether good or evil, first passed through the hands of a sovereign, loving God before it got to us. And He uses it for our good.

Once you make peace with God’s sovereignty and His ability to write straight with crooked lines, the more at peace you will be with those who mistreat you. While God is not the author of confusion or evil, He seeks to use all things for our transformation.

When Jesus defended Mary, He transformed her act into an immortal example of what real worship entails. Her example was such that we’re still talking about it two thousand years later.

(4) Christians often get offended by reading into words and actions

This usually happens when a person is oversensitive and thin-skinned. In my experience, this makes up most cases in which a Christian takes offense at another believer.

As a group, Christians are the most easily offended people in the world when we should be the least. While Mary was mistreated twice, she didn't take offense.

(5) Christians often get offended with a person when they believe false accusations against them

Wise and discerning Christians who have been around the block ignore gossip that puts other believers in a bad light. In fact, in the eyes of the wise and discerning believer, any statement that has a defamatory tone is discredited out of the gate.

When wise and discerning believers are concerned about someone, they go straight to the person privately as Jesus taught us to do, asking questions rather than making allegations.

Some Christians, however, never think to do this. Instead, they readily believe slanderous allegations about a sister or brother in Christ without ever going to that person first.

The question "How would I want to be treated if someone were saying these things about me?" never seems to occur to them. The life of Jesus Christ always leads us to live that question. The flesh always leads us in the opposite direction.

Remember, Satan is the slanderer (that's what "Devil" means), and he uses gossip to destroy relationships. That's why the Bible says that believing gossip separates close friends²⁸

and that one of the seven things the Lord hates is “sowing seeds of discord among brethren.”²⁹

(6) What you do with a hurt is a choice you make

You can choose to be offended and make a friend out of your hurt, feed it, take it out for daily walks, cuddle it, and protect it until it destroys you and others. A root of bitterness, if allowed to live, will defile many and prove destructive to your own spirit.³⁰

You can also choose to be offended and retaliate actively or passively.

Or you can choose to live by Christ and bring your hurt to God. Sometimes the Lord will lead you to go to the person and talk to them in a gracious manner, seeking reconciliation.³¹

Other times He will lead you to forbear it, take it to the cross, let it go, and move on. “A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.”³²

Sometimes He will show you that you’ve completely misinterpreted the actions of another.

In cases of repeated abuse, which I’m not addressing in this section, getting others involved is often wise and necessary. Forgiving someone doesn’t mean you should enable that person to commit a crime or continue to devastate the lives of others.

(7) To be offended by a child of God is to be offended by God

When Jesus began preaching in His hometown of Nazareth, He offended His neighbors. They stumbled over Him and rejected who He really was.³³

When you choose to take offense at another Christian, you are rejecting who they are in Christ. Thus it affects your relationship with Jesus, whether you realize it or not. Why? Because Christ and His body are connected, so “if you’ve done it to the least of these my brethren, you’ve done it unto Me.”³⁴ Again, I’m not equating being offended with being hurt.

(8) You can live free from offense

This doesn’t mean that you will never be hurt. Nor does it mean that you will never be angry. Jesus got angry. Remember His temple tantrum? Paul said, “Be angry and sin not. Don’t let the sun go down on your wrath.”³⁵

Anger is a normal human emotion when someone abuses you or abuses someone you care about. But what you do with your anger determines whether or not it is sin.

In addition, we should always be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”³⁶ The Lord has called us to the high road of living without offense. And He has given us

both the power and the will to do His good pleasure in this area.³⁷

Remembering Mary

According to John's gospel, Jesus' ministry began with a banquet celebration, and it ended with a banquet celebration.³⁸

What took place at the banquet in Bethany would be rehearsed everywhere the gospel would be proclaimed. Why? I cannot improve upon how this question was answered in one of my coauthored books:

They beat Jesus' head with their hands, fracturing His nasal bones. They took turns spitting into the contusions of His blindfolded face and knelt before Him and taunted, "Hail, King of the Jews." Then they crushed onto His head that crown of thorns. With blood, spit, and sweat running down His face, Jesus looked around.

Where were His disciples?

Where were all His faithful followers?

Where were all those whom He had healed?

Where were all those whose eyes He had opened, whose ears He had unstopped, whose

mouths He had opened, whose limbs He had restored?

It was almost more than He could bear.

Then Jesus smelled the perfume ...

And when the soldiers beat Him with a whip until the blood ran down His back like a waterfall, His skin already supersensitive from the effects of hematidrosis (sweating blood); and when they marched Him 650 yards through the streets and made Him climb the Via Dolorosa, carrying the 150-pound patibulum on which His wrists were later to be nailed, reducing Him to a beast of burden being led to the slaughterhouse; when the weight of the cross produced contusions on the right shoulder and back on that three-hour walk through the city of Jerusalem to Golgotha on the Way of the Cross—He smelled the perfume.

And when they stripped Him naked and nailed Him to the crosspiece He had carried; when they took those six-inch spikes and lacerated the median nerves in His hands and feet; and when they lifted Him up on that cross, above the sinking garbage heap called Golgotha—Jesus smelled the perfume ...

And when everyone who passed by mocked Him on the cross; when the chief priests and scribes, even those thieves who were crucified with Him, taunted and teased Him in His agony; and when the loneliness became so severe He was about ready to call ten thousand angels to rescue Him, Jesus looked around. In the haze of hurt, He barely could make out the figures of the three Marys—His mother, Mary; His aunt Mary (wife of Cleopas); and Mary Magdalene—and then He smelled the perfume ...

And when His body, already in shock, hung from the wrists, when He struggled for breath to chant two of His favorite psalms (31 and 22), unable to expel even small hiccups of sound without straightening His knees and raising Himself on the fulcrum of His nailed feet, the only thing the soldiers offered His parched throat (“I thirst!”) so He could keep singing was a drink of vinegar, which only made singing more difficult ... Jesus smelled the perfume.

And He remembered the woman who had given all she had so He would remember

God's love for Him, and in that smell He could even detect the odors that reminded Him that He was going home, from whence He had come....³⁹

John 11 closes with the chief priests plotting Lazarus' death. There is a principle here. Resurrection life will always provoke hostility, especially from the outwardly religious.

The Lord's Heartbeat

The Lord is looking for a group of people who will give Him first place in their lives, including their time. He's after a people who are willing to do whatever is necessary to satisfy His heart. In short, He's looking for a people who will love and worship Him extravagantly.

The gospel narrative of Bethany symbolizes all of these things.

God wants every Christian to be a Bethany, and He wants every church to be a Bethany—an extended family made up of sisters and brothers who waste themselves upon Jesus and satisfy His heart ... His very own “house of figs.”

To this you and I have been called.

Let's now look at the fourth and final narrative ...

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