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John 13:1-3, 10-11, New Living Translation

13 *Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end. ² It was time for supper, and the devil had already prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God.*

¹⁰ *Jesus replied, "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean. And you disciples are clean, but not all of you."*

¹¹ *For Jesus knew who would betray him. That is what he meant when he said, "Not all of you are clean."*

Matthew 26:14-16, New Living Translation

26 ¹⁴ *Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, went to the leading priests ¹⁵ and asked, "How much will you pay me to betray Jesus to you?" And they gave him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ From that time on, Judas began looking for an opportunity to betray Jesus.*

Matthew 26:47-50, 27:3-8, New Living Translation

26 ⁴⁷ *And even as Jesus said this, Judas, one of the twelve disciples, arrived with a crowd of men armed with swords and clubs. They had been sent by the leading priests and elders of the people. ⁴⁸ The traitor, Judas, had given them a prearranged signal: "You will know which one to arrest when I greet him with a kiss." ⁴⁹ So Judas came straight to Jesus. "Greetings, Rabbi!" he exclaimed and gave him the kiss.*

⁵⁰ *Jesus said, "My friend, go ahead and do what you have come for."*

27 ³ *When Judas, who had betrayed him, realized that Jesus had been condemned to die, he was filled with remorse. So he took the thirty pieces of silver back to the leading priests and the elders. ⁴ "I have sinned," he declared, "for I have betrayed an innocent man."*

"What do we care?" they retorted. "That's your problem."

⁵ Then Judas threw the silver coins down in the Temple and went out and hanged himself.

⁶ The leading priests picked up the coins. “It wouldn’t be right to put this money in the Temple treasury,” they said, “since it was payment for murder.” ⁷ After some discussion they finally decided to buy the potter’s field, and they made it into a cemetery for foreigners. ⁸ That is why the field is still called the Field of Blood.

Acts 1:15-19, New Living Translation

¹⁵ ¹ During this time, when about 120 believers were together in one place, Peter stood up and addressed them. ¹⁶ “Brothers,” he said, “the Scriptures had to be fulfilled concerning Judas, who guided those who arrested Jesus. This was predicted long ago by the Holy Spirit, speaking through King David. ¹⁷ Judas was one of us and shared in the ministry with us.”

¹⁸ (Judas had bought a field with the money he received for his treachery. Falling headfirst there, his body split open, spilling out all his intestines. ¹⁹ The news of his death spread to all the people of Jerusalem, and they gave the place the Aramaic name Akeldama, which means “Field of Blood.”)

One big Potter’s Field.

In our passages from Matthew and John, we read about Judas betraying Jesus. We see that before Judas betrays him, Jesus knows that he will do it. We’ve looked at this first passage, from John, before. This is the scene where Jesus washes the feet of the Apostles, and during this ceremony, makes a clothed statement about someone among them not being clean. Indeed, later, Judas ID’s Jesus to those who want to execute him – by kissing Jesus on the cheek – and in return, Judas is paid thirty pieces of silver. At that moment, Jesus actually says to him: “*My friend, go ahead and do what you have come for.*” Jesus seems to forgive Judas, and also

seems resigned to what must happen. But then Judas regrets his actions. He tries to donate the silver to the temple, presumably to cleanse himself, but the chief priests who gave Judas the thirty pieces of silver in the first place, don't want this "blood money" back, and so they will only use it to buy some land called the "potter's field". The reason they feel okay about using the money in this way is that the land will serve as a graveyard for strangers, to bury people the community does not know. Presumably no one will visit graves in the "field of blood" and the community will not be tainted by being on this land. But Judas, in remorse, and realizing he cannot undo what he has done, kills himself. Note that Matthew says that Judas "*was filled with remorse*". A subtlety is that the word that Matthew uses for remorse is *metamelomai*, which is often translated as "changing one's mind"; it is not the word remorse, which is *metanoeo*, and which Matthew uses elsewhere to refer to sincere regret. It seems that Judas is not truly convicted of his own guilt, at least not to the point of turning back to God.

Potters, at this time and in this place, did more than work with clay. They also worked with metals. However, in today's passage, when the chief priests buy the "potter's field" with Judas' blood money, they are referring to the field where potters would go to collect reddish clay to use to make pottery. Because of this passage, we use the term Potter's Field today to refer to fields where destitute

people are buried. There are potter's fields all around the country, with one in New York city that is referred to frequently on the TV show *Law and Order*. There's a Potter's field in Glenwood Springs, and Doc Holliday and Kid Curry are buried there. The graves there are unmarked. That's what a Potter's field is, the forgotten final resting place of forgotten people.

Our final passage, by the way, seems to conflict with the story told in our first three passages, and we'll get back to this issue in just a bit. This is important.

Now, kids love to play in cemeteries, and there was one that I used to play in with friends of mine. We would climb around and see who could find the oldest gravestone. But I grew up in southern California, so the oldest grave was never really that old; yet to us, it was amazing to think of someone dying in the 1800s. I remember one day when a bunch of us were running around the cemetery, shouting out dates on gravestones, when one boy yelled out really loud. "It's someone from my family!" he shouted. We all ran over there – and sure enough, someone with his last name was born in the early 1800s and was buried in our cemetery. I don't remember his family name, but it was unusual enough for us all to be convinced that it was indeed an ancestor of his. He was so proud. My friend glowed. He had found a relative born over a hundred years before him. It anchored him to the world, gave him a permanence that he hadn't felt before.

You know, the Pharaohs had themselves mummified through a very complex process, and clearly, they invested tremendous expertise and money in having their bodies preserved as perfectly as possible. It's believed that they thought that they could live again after death, but only if their bodies were maintained in a form where the spirits could visually recognize them. They were like my friend, like many of us are. We want somehow for our lives to extend beyond our natural lifespans.

Let's get back to our Bible passages, in particular, number 4, which is from Acts. Acts was written by Luke, who also wrote a Gospel. The interesting thing about our passage is that it gives a completely different version of the story of the field. It says: *"Judas had bought a field with the money he received for his treachery. Falling headfirst there, his body split open, spilling out all his intestines."*¹⁹ *The news of his death spread to all the people of Jerusalem, and they gave the place the Aramaic name Akeldama, which means "Field of Blood."* So, it was Judas who bought the field, not the Chief Priests. And it says nothing about it being a potter's field. Apparently, Judas simply wanted to own some real estate. It was named the Field of Blood because Judas fell and splattered his guts all over it.

So, which version is reality? It seems that they can't both be true – and this brings up a topic I'd like to talk about. You see, my friend who wanted to have some permanence on earth, and the Pharaohs, who wanted to live forever, well,

they have something in common with the Gospel writers, people like Matthew and Luke. Consider this: you might be tempted to discount the version told in Acts, since it's expressed as a quick afterthought, and it's kind of unbelievable. Judas took a spill, and this caused his guts to spill out? Sounds silly. But, remember that the Gospel writers had a mission. They were telling the story of Jesus, and they very much wanted to get us excited about his mission. The Gospel writers wanted to do something that would far outlive their lives. So, it would make sense that Matthew would want to talk about Judas regretting his actions and trying ineffectively to make amends. Maybe this is the truth.

A related issue is that Matthew repeatedly mentions the Old Testament in order to make the early Christians believe that Jesus was fulfilling Old Testament prophecies; we've talked about this in recent weeks. In fact, look at the end of our third passage. I left out the tail end of it. Here's how it actually ends:

The leading priests picked up the coins. "It wouldn't be right to put this money in the Temple treasury," they said, "since it was payment for murder." ⁷After some discussion they finally decided to buy the potter's field, and they made it into a cemetery for foreigners. That is why the field is still called the Field of Blood. ⁹This fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah that says,

*"They took the thirty pieces of silver —
the price at which he was valued by the people of Israel,
¹⁰and purchased the potter's field,
as the LORD directed."*

Matthew is doing it again – using the story of the Field of Blood to argue that Jesus was fulfilling a prophesy from Jeremiah. Matthew apparently made a mistake in this biblical reference: this prophesy he paraphrases at the tail end of this passage is most likely from Zechariah, not Jeremiah. Matthew got it wrong. If Jesus was fulfilling a prophesy, it was not from Jeremiah. Did Matthew make this up?

There are scholars who believe that Matthew more or less invented this story about the Chief Priests buying the potter's field to bury strangers. Perhaps he got it from an oral tradition that was passed around among early believers, as some have suggested. There are always those who can find a way to make inconsistencies in the Bible makes sense. People have argued that the original Greek of the Gospel implies that Judas didn't necessarily buy the field himself, as it seems to say in Acts: he just supplied the means by which it was bought, making the stories in Matthew and Acts consistent. And maybe he didn't have his guts fall out accidentally: it could have been part of his act of suicide.

The bottom line is this. The Gospels are not modern biographies of Jesus. They describe the life of Jesus through a series of stories. The authors were working from material that came from multiple sources, many of them oral. For the most part, the Gospels are actually quite consistent, and mesh with what we know of the history of the time. Yet, the Gospel writers were not trying to write material that

we would call biographies. Have you read any modern biographies? They can be tedious as hell. The author insists on giving a blow-by-blow description of a person's life, deliberately including tiny details so that we see that the author has carefully documented the famous person's life. In contrast, the Gospels tell us about Jesus by describing important events in his life in a story-like fashion. The writers picked stories that would convey the spirit of who Jesus was and what Jesus taught. They chose stories from his life that would make him credible and excite us. That's why Matthew was careful to draw out the parallel between Jesus' actions and the prophecies of the Old Testament. And the authors didn't sweat the details of Jesus' life. What was important was to get the big picture right.

All four Gospel writers had the same mission: to make sure that the story of Jesus stayed alive as long as people stayed alive on this planet. But the day will come when no one will need the Gospels anymore.

We want to live a long time. My friend wanted to extend his own existence to a hundred years before he was born. The Pharaohs wanted to live forever.

The people who knew how to truly impact humanity for all of eternity were the Gospels writers. They left four different records of the life and teachings of Jesus, and about his message of eternal life for all of us. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John knew that this life on Earth is not what's most important in the end. Telling

the story of Jesus as if he had been Abraham Lincoln or Michelangelo would have been ridiculous, making it seem like he was just one of us and nothing more.

This whole planet is just one big potter's field. We're all strangers, here for a while – and then we leave for all of eternity while our bodies remain behind. Sure, we should enjoy being alive today. We should work hard to end suffering, to make life better for all people, to make sure our children become good people, to pass on our faith. Jesus taught us to do this. But it's folly to view this life as the major reason for our existence. The Gospel writers knew this. So, they weren't concerned with the day-to-day details of the life of Jesus. They weren't trying to record a human life. They recorded the life of a God who became a human temporarily.

One day, this planet will be nothing more than a giant potter's field, empty of all living humans. We are all just passing through. In the meantime, enjoy your lives, your families. If you ever wonder why God lets bad things happen, there are two reasons. First, when we suffer, it gives us a chance to get closer to God - because that's what we do, we reach out for God when we are in need. If we were never desperate, we'd never find the right path. And second, in the end, what happens here doesn't matter. This is a potter's field, full of the bodies of strangers.

We truly do have all of eternity to look forward to. It's real.

God bless you. And remember where you are headed. Amen.