

## Is Jesus a means or an end?

A study of **John 11:45 – 12:11**

By David Shelley

The Big Idea: **Christ is both the end and the means.**

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45Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. 46But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. 47Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. 48If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place<sup>[c]</sup> and our nation."

49Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! 50You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

51He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, 52and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. 53So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

54Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.

55When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. 56They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?" 57But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.

1Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 3Then Mary took about a pint<sup>[a]</sup> of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 5"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.<sup>[b]</sup>" 6He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

7"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. 8You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

9Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, 11for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

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### What do the means matter if you're aiming for the wrong end?

You've heard the phrase, "the end justifies the means." It's not always true, but this passage in John's Gospel makes the terms important. The end is where we desire to end up. The means are how we get there.

Do you remember the Dr. Seuss classic, "Marvin K. Mooney, will you please go now?" The whole book was a list of ways that Marvin K. Mooney could go, but it was

time to go now. It listed dozens of means, but one clear end. “Marvin K. Mooney, please go now.” The end was for Marvin to go. The means were any of the ways for Marvin to leave.

In election season, we’re all aiming for a desirable end—an improved nation. The disagreement is over what an improved nation would be, and what means will get us there. At times we talk as if a certain candidate were the end. The climax of all this will be to have this person or that person in the Oval Office. But that is wrong. The candidates are not ends in themselves; they are means. The objective is an improved nation, and we vote on what we think will be the better means to that end.

In life we’re aiming for an end. And what is that end? What will truly matter for eternity? We often make the mistake of using God as a means to the end we think we want. God can get me this. God, if He is a good means, will give me my desired end.

But God is not the means to a greater end. God is the end. If we don’t have the right end, we cannot have the right means.

Jesus is the end and the means. He is the why and the how. He is not only the way to get it, but He is where we long to end up, the eternal treasure. He is what we truly want, if we only knew it, and He is how we get it. He is the endless Source of glory we look for in all the wrong places, and He is the way for us to enter.

This passage illustrates our failure to see Jesus as the true end and the true means.

### **1. Some see Jesus as a means to their ends, but God’s plan is bigger than that. (verses 45-54)**

Earlier in chapter 11 Jesus has come back to Bethany after his friend Lazarus has died. Jesus raised Lazarus to life again, and that is the point at which we pick up the story.

His enemies have been plotting in Jerusalem to have Him killed once He shows up in Jerusalem again. Some people were excited about the raising of Lazarus and began to trust Jesus (**verse 45**), but some went to tell the authorities (**verse 46**).

The Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish supreme court, was called together to discuss what to do about Jesus (**verse 47**). This was a political powder keg. Whenever someone had come along claiming to be a messiah—and before Jesus did, several others had—it threatened the peace and stability of the whole region. Instability in the Middle East is not a new problem. It was very unstable 2000 years ago.

At the time, the Roman Empire had subdued the region that they called Palestine. Because the Jews were so violently committed to their faith, the Romans at times thought it best to allow the Jews to have their own religion and priesthood—rather than trying to force them to bow to Caesar.

At any sign of rebellion, however, the Romans could carry out a slaughter of the local people, and they had done so before. Nobody wanted that.

So the Sanhedrin was not meeting merely because they hated Jesus. They were meeting because many people were following Jesus, claiming that Jesus was going to be their king and throw off their Roman overlords—a situation that could explode into horrible violence.

Caiaphas was the high priest, and he held his position for a long time because he was able to negotiate volatile situations like this. From a human perspective, these Jewish authorities were trying to do the best thing. They feared that any great

disturbance surrounding Jesus could bring down the wrath of Rome's legions. It could lead to the burning of Jerusalem, to the destruction of the temple, and to the rape and massacre of many of their people.

It was not a paranoid fear. This very thing happened 40 years later. Jerusalem was burned, the temple was destroyed, the people were brutalized, and the Jews' sacrificial worship came to an end, never to recover.

So the men in the Sanhedrin were not gangsters plotting an assassination. They were civic leaders trying to avoid disaster for their people.

But they were missing one crucial piece of information. Jesus truly is the Messiah and their eternal King. Sometimes people with good intentions make bad decisions because they don't have all the information. And no information is more important than who Jesus is.

That was true then, and it is true now. If you don't know who Jesus is, you cannot make the most important decisions rightly. Without knowing Him, you cannot choose eternal life, you cannot live for eternal values, and you cannot make right choices about the better world He promises to build.

If you don't know who Jesus is, you will always be working against the life-giving Creator instead of with Him. You will always be His enemy instead of His friend.

So these well-intentioned, responsible leaders met to decide what to do about the "problem" of this Jesus of Nazareth, whose wonderful, life-giving miracles were giving hope to thousands, and whose teachings about a Kingdom of grace and peace were threatening their way of life.

Notice **verse 48**. "If we let Him continue, everyone will trust Him, and then the Romans will come and take away our place and our nation." That sounds like some of the paranoia I hear at election time. "If we lose this election, God won't be God anymore, and the devil will take over the country."

Don't hear me wrong. We should strive to do the right things. The Sanhedrin was striving to do the right thing. But you can't do the right thing if you forget who is Lord. The chief priests didn't know. They didn't bother to find out. They missed the most important piece of information.

Nicodemus had that information. John lets us know that Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees and was in on these conversations. He had gone to meet Jesus (in chapter 3), and had argued with the others that Jesus deserved a hearing before being condemned (7:50). But they didn't listen to him. They ignored the most important information.

Caiaphas, the high priest and president of the Sanhedrin, stood up and said (in **verse 50**), "It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

Now, that is a remarkable statement for several reasons. First, it is remarkable because it directly violated a long-held Jewish principle. Repeatedly, pagan rulers tried to reason with the Jews that it would be better to compromise their standards than that the whole nation should suffer. And repeatedly, the Jews insisted that they would rather all suffer rape or execution than to betray one of their own family. They defiantly held on to a "one for all and all for one" mentality.

So Caiaphas said something very out of character. In a way, it was a very pagan thing to say. The pagans had no trouble saying, “The principle is not important. Do whatever works.” But the Jew would say, “Without our principles, we are nothing. We cannot violate morality just to make life easier, or we will lose everything.” Pagans didn’t care about being right. They cared about being effective. Normally, the Jews would not give in.

### **The difference between utilitarian values and godly values**

The pagan approach is something we later started calling “utilitarian” philosophy. To put it simply, if you are utilitarian you are not asking what is right. You are asking what will accomplish your goal. Any means are acceptable, because only the end matters.

All of us in many ways have to ask what is effective. But a utilitarian will make effectiveness the guiding principle. God’s people do not. God’s people are concerned first about doing what honors the Lord. He is the end. If it’s not effective, that’s too bad, but we have to honor the Lord. Without the Lord, we have no hope and no future. We won’t dishonor the Lord just to accomplish our goals faster.

A utilitarian will cheat to get ahead; God’s people won’t. A utilitarian will use people but turn his back on them when they are no longer useful; God’s people will continue to value people ahead of goals. God’s people will care about the powerless, the elderly, the disadvantaged, the unborn. Utilitarian political candidates will lie about opponents in order to gain votes; a godly candidate won’t—and it is hard for a godly candidate to get elected in a utilitarian society.

A utilitarian world view is me-centered; a godly world view is God-centered. A utilitarian church will do anything to put more people in the seats; a God-centered church will do what affirms Christ as Lord over all, whether it seems efficient or not.

My point is, it is surprising for the high priest to say such a pagan thing about a fellow Jew. “Better to sacrifice him than to risk the suffering of everyone.”

And if that weren’t surprising enough, John points out another surprise in **verse 51**. Even though the words of Caiaphas were inappropriate for a man of his position, yet God spoke through them something more profound than anyone knew at the time.

The high priest, who presided over sacrifices made for the sins of the people, was really saying, even though he did not mean to, that Jesus would be the sacrifice for the sins of His people. Jesus would become the means of our purification.

But John goes further yet in **verse 52**. Jesus was dying not only for His people who were Jews, but for His people whom He would save out of every people and tongue and tribe and nation. Because, John wants you to know, this was not merely a Jewish issue, and Jesus was not the King of the Jews only. This matters to all people, because Jesus is Lord of all.

Jesus, John reminds us, was going to die not only to save a few, but to make a unified community out of people of all ethnicities. So this is not merely about your personal salvation—although John wants you to know that by trusting Jesus you can have life in His name (John 20:31). Jesus is your Savior, but Jesus is not merely a means to your personal end. Jesus is the end. He has His own all-encompassing purposes in this—and even in the Sanhedrin’s plot to get rid of Him. Jesus is making a people for Himself,

and so He is not only a means to your eternal end; Jesus is the end toward which you are saved. Your salvation is a means to an end that Jesus already had in mind before you were born.

Caiaphas saw Jesus as a means to an end, but he did not know that Jesus is the end itself. We live unto Christ, or we do not know true life at all. We live for Him and His eternal purposes, or it is not eternal life that we have.

I may think that Jesus is merely the means to my personal end. I may think that the purpose of believing in Jesus is merely so that I can go to Heaven when I die, but I would be wrong to believe that, because Jesus is not only the means to my end. Jesus is the end itself.

And the reason I trust Jesus is not merely to get the puny goals that I imagine, but so that I can be involved in the awesome, cosmic, glorious, eternal ends that He has prepared. It's never about getting what I think I want; it's about getting what our Maker and King wants for us.

If I trust Jesus only to give me what I think is best, I'm not really trusting Jesus. But if I trust Jesus to give what He determines to give for His all-wise and loving purposes, then I am truly trusting Jesus. That is the kind of trust that teaches me to say, "Lord, thank you for loving me enough to give me not what I want, but what you know is best."

Jesus had been telling His disciples this for some time, telling them that He was going to Jerusalem to offer up His life, to be betrayed into the hands of pagans, to be tortured and nailed to a cross of execution, and then to rise again.

All this was unthinkable to the disciples, so they did not understand it even when it happened. But Jesus was teaching them to trust Him with the means as well as the end. He had planned it all, as painful as it would seem at the time. And He would see it through to His glorious end.

It would happen according to His timing—namely, His death would correspond to the temple sacrifices that commemorated Passover. He would die during the annual celebration of God's miraculous delivery of His people out of bondage and onward to His promised land. All those powerful historical symbols would correspond directly to what Jesus was doing by dying in Jerusalem on that holiday weekend.

So Jesus would stay away from Jerusalem until the time was right. That is why **verse 54** tells us He did not build a political campaign around his wonderful miracle in Bethany, but He withdrew until the time was right for His Passover sacrifice to be made.

**We tend to see Jesus as a means to our own ends, but Jesus has bigger plans that we imagine. Jesus is both the end and the means.**

## **2. Man's way is to purify ourselves, but Jesus' means was to purify us by His sacrifice. (verses 55-57)**

When the time had come, **verse 55** tells us, thousands of people poured into Jerusalem from near and distant regions for the Passover celebration. They went, **verse 55** says, "*to purify themselves.*"

That phrase, "to purify themselves" has a double meaning. In one sense, the people went in obedience to the Old Testament command to remember God's saving

work in the Passover. That is what the NIV is referring to by translating that phrase as “*for their ceremonial cleansing.*”

But in another sense, people were doing this to purify themselves. This is similar to the statement when the expert in the law came and asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus said, “What do you read in the law?”

The expert said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus said, “That’s it. Do that.”

But, **Luke** tells us (**10:29**) the expert wanted *to justify himself*. He wanted to know that he could be saved by fulfilling the law on his own merits. And salvation does not come that way. Salvation comes through God’s work, not yours. If you want to justify yourself, you’re in eternal peril. You’re looking for salvation in a place you cannot find it. Only Jesus is the means.

And in that sense, Caiaphas and the others were in trouble as well. They approached Passover to purify themselves. They did not realize they needed the perfect sacrifice of Jesus to provide purification for them (**Hebrews 1:3**).

In the deepest sense, you cannot justify yourself, and you cannot purify yourself. Jesus is the means of your justification. Jesus is the means of your purification. Jesus is the means by which you can be made right with God. Jesus is the end of salvation, and Jesus is the means of salvation.

That very week Jesus Himself would become the perfect and final Passover Lamb sacrificed for the salvation of His people—not Jews only, but people from every nation who repent of their self-justification and their self-purification and put their trust in His final and sufficient death in their place.

This means and ends issue is no minor concern. It is the ultimate issue of our lives, because it is the issue of how we may have the eternal life for which we were created.

And from the time the serpent in the garden convinced the man and the woman to think self-centeredly instead of God-centeredly, to make independent choices about good and evil instead of trusting God’s word regarding good and evil, and to thereby live to justify themselves rather than to rely fully on God’s justification of them, people everywhere at all times have succumbed to the temptation to seek to justify themselves, to purify themselves, and to *be the means* of achieving their own eternity.

We have all done it, and unless we repent and trust the Lord instead, we all continue to do it. We live to be our own means to our own ends.

But there is no good end apart from the maker of Heaven and earth, Jesus Himself, and there is no other means of having His ends than Jesus Himself.

Your world view will not give you life. Your religious devotion will not give you life. Your works to justify yourself will not give you life. As we heard last week, that is not what good works are about. Truly good works are the expressions of trust in the Lord who has fully justified us already. They are the outward manifestations of an inner faith that has been brought to life in us through the work of Jesus. He gives you life.

The religion of the Jews did not give them life. What it had done was direct their faith to the God who would provide the life they needed in His way, by His means. All

the Old Testament laws and sacrifices pointed to a fulfillment in this Jesus who is heading into Jerusalem for the Passover to be the final sacrifice for the sins of His people.

His was the work of bearing God's justice once for all eternity. He was the one and only means of life for all who will trust Him instead of seeking to purify themselves.

As long as you are trying to purify yourself instead of resting in Jesus' purification of you, you're living an unrepentant life. Your focus is still on your works rather than on the sufficient work of Jesus.

Repent of self-righteousness. Trust Jesus as the means of your salvation, and trust Him as the end of your salvation. Jesus is both the end and the means.

### **3. Judas' was offended that Jesus was treated as an end, but Jesus is the end.**

**(verses 1-11)**

While many people wanted the Man who raised Lazarus to go on into Jerusalem—either so they could elect Him king or so they could kill Him—Jesus had slipped away to wait for the right time.

Now, as chapter 12 begins, we've come to the final week before Jesus' death. He is back at Bethany, just east of Jerusalem, with Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary.

[Before we look at the passage itself, let's try to understand the differing accounts of this event in three Gospels. Matthew (ch. 26) and Mark (ch. 14) mention it after they have already showed Jesus in Jerusalem, while John mentions it here, seemingly before He enters Jerusalem. Matthew and Mark don't give the woman's name; John identifies her as the Mary we have met before. Matthew and Mark tell us the dinner was at the home of Simon the leper; John does not.

These are not irreconcilable differences. First, not all the events in the Gospels are told in chronological order. Understand that after entering Jerusalem, Jesus returned again, maybe several times, to spend the evening in Bethany with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. For train-of-thought reasons, Matthew and Mark could be flashing back to something that happened a few nights earlier, or John could include this event earlier to avoid breaking up the sequence of events inside Jerusalem. Neither order is crucial to the story itself.

Second, Matthew and Mark never mention Mary's name. We know her through Luke and John, so there is no contradiction in how they describe her. Third, John does not tell us where Simon the leper's home was, except that it was in Bethany. We don't know whether Lazarus and his sisters were part of Simon's household or were neighbors. In a small village, it was typical for neighbors to share special dinners together, so it would be no stranger for Martha to be helping serve dinner in Simon's house than for me to bring a dessert to a dinner at my friends' home. In that culture, Jesus and Lazarus would have been eating with the men, Martha and Mary would have been bringing in the food as women did. End of confusion, I hope. Now, back to the text.]

Jesus is reclining at the table, the way all the men would have been posed at a special dinner like this one, resting on an elbow with their faces near the low table, their feet to the outside where Mary would have approached them.

The reclining posture is significant. For normal meals, people would sit to eat. A reclining posture indicated a very special dinner, a banquet, in which something special

was taking place. The fact that Jesus so often eats at banquets tells us two things. First, it tells us that people often considered it special to have Jesus in their home. Second, it tells us that Jesus did not find it inconsistent to minister among the poor and then eat at expensive dinners. Jesus reached out to the poor and to the rich alike.

Mary, who clearly loved Jesus and wanted to honor Him, brought in a vial of very expensive perfume. It might have been the most valuable thing she owned. Typically someone might have used a few drops on the head, but Mary seems to have emptied the whole thing, several ounces, on Jesus' tired and dusty feet.

A servant might wash a superior's feet at the table with a basin of water and a towel, but this lavish act of washing with perfume and hair was as astonishing an act then as it would be today. The act of drying with her hair may show that this was not an entirely premeditated act, but a spontaneous act of love for the man who had shown so much kindness to her, including raising her brother from the dead.

Others—ignorant of what Jesus meant to Mary—would be shocked by what had just happened. Mark says that some of the others were upset, and Matthew tells us that the disciples themselves were offended. But John tells us it was Judas who spoke the words that were on other minds.

Judas asks the kind of question that is also an accusation. "Have you stopped beating your wife?" You cannot give a good answer to a question like that.

I was once in a new church that was committed to simple structure, frugal expenditures and giving a lot to missions. They built an efficient, multi-purpose facility, had done a lot of the work themselves, and the main contractor had donated hundreds of thousands of dollars of labor. The worship building was of inexpensive cinder blocks, textured to hide what would surely look cheap otherwise. They had chosen a rich burgundy for the carpet and applied a few touches of brass so it would look like a place of worship and not just another big room. In some ways it was disappointing for a church of our resources, but the people were committed to spending less on ourselves and giving more to the Kingdom. They were among the most generous, most loving people I have known.

Yet I remember it now, because the day that we opened that building two young adults came into our office with scowling brows and asked through clenched teeth, "How can you justify spending money on a building like that?" When we asked what they meant, they made it clear that they considered our church building an unnecessary luxury. We should be giving that money, they said, to the poor.

I was stunned, because I had never known such unselfish, generous people as I met in that church. I couldn't believe what they had put into this building—in terms of personal sacrifice—to save costs. And these were the same people who not only supported missions to some of the poorest communities in our part of the world, but made trips every year to be of service to the helpless and disadvantaged. Yet these two visitors, who had never been involved in any of it with us, now thought themselves in a position to judge the church people as selfish materialists. I doubt these critics even knew who the poor people of our community were. They obviously did not care about 1500 people having a place to worship together. They were simply self-righteous accusers.



You probably have similar stories to tell. John's story was of what Judas said when a woman gave her love to Jesus at great personal expense. John knows that Judas' question was not well-intentioned. Accusers usually aren't.

Judas' question clearly is not an attempt to understand what motivated Mary. It's not as if women regularly spent a year's wages to wash one person's feet—nor did anyone normally give away that kind of money to the poor. John can see that Judas had not been waiting for a large sum of money so that he could give it to his favorite charity. Judas himself was not entirely trustworthy with money.

No, Judas' question is not an attempt to understand. Judas' question is simply a way to condemn someone else.

But what was going on between Mary and Jesus? Mary was not thinking about the strategy of what she was doing. Her gift of love made no practical sense. It wasn't about the means. It was about Jesus, and Jesus is the end in Himself.

And that's what Judas objected to. For all his time with Jesus, Judas never understood that Jesus is the end. Judas thought Jesus was a means to something else. Jesus may have been a means to power or wealth for Judas. Jesus may have been a means to freedom from the Romans or any of a hundred other things.

The point is, Judas saw Jesus as a means, and he was offended when someone treated Jesus as the end itself.

Judas, while enjoying an expensive meal, feels justified in criticizing Mary for her expensive gift. He doesn't mind being the recipient of someone's generosity. He is offended when extraordinary expense is lavished on Jesus.

But what did Jesus say to Judas (in **verse 7**)? "Leave her alone." He used the same verb he had used when he told the disciples not to keep children from coming to Him (**Mark 10:14**). Literally, we could translate it, "Forgive them."

Jesus is saying, "Hold nothing against Mary. Forgive her. Let her be." Then Jesus says another statement that sounded more shocking to those at the dinner than to us. He said, "*It was in order to prepare me for burial.*"

A little perfume would be used on a person. A lot of perfume would be used on a decaying body as it was carried to a tomb. But in this whole room, only Jesus takes this anointing as appropriate for Him, because only Jesus knows that He is about to die.

Then, in **verse 8**, Jesus makes one of those statements that would be offensive if Jesus were not the end, if He were not the person unto whom we all must live if we are to know life at all. "*You will always have the poor among you.*" That is, Judas, you can give to the poor anytime you want. "But you will not always have Me."

What is Jesus saying? "Judas, this kind of love for me is appropriate, because I am not merely the means to something else. I am the end. I am not only the Life-Giver, but I am also the One to live for.

"And Judas, you will not have forever to get around to loving Me. This is it. Now is your opportunity. Mary has seized the opportunity, and loves Me now.

"But Judas, you have only days, and then your opportunity is gone forever. Because you don't love Me. You love only yourself. And your pretend concern for the poor is not a reflection of your love for Me. It's only an attempt to justify yourself, to make yourself look more worthy than Mary.

“Judas, it has never been about looking more worthy. From day one it has been about Me, your Creator, your Lord. I, Jesus, am infinitely worthy. But you must get to know Me now, because the opportunity is going to close.”

John adds an addendum to this event in **verses 9-11**. John shows us a crowd of people looking for Jesus. Some of them were putting their faith in Him. Some of them only wanted to see Lazarus, evidence perhaps that Jesus could be a means to a desired end. And some of them not only want to silence Jesus; they want to kill and silence the one whose life is a testimony to the grace and power of Jesus.

And there you have the alternatives. You can follow Jesus as a sort of short-term curiosity, wondering if He might be the means to some end you have in mind. Or you can seek to silence Him, opposing those who do receive life from Him. Or you can trust Him as your Lord and Savior.

Are you going to try to use Jesus to get what you think you want?

Are you going to try to silence Him?

Or are you going to trust Him, even with the unexpected and painful experiences?

Will you not always have Him, or will you have Him forever?

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**Introduction: What do the means matter if you're aiming for the wrong end?**

**1. Some see Jesus as a means to their ends, but God's plan is bigger than that. (verses 45-54)**

**The difference between utilitarian values and godly values**

**2. Man's way is to purify ourselves, but Jesus' means was to purify us by His sacrifice. (verses 55-57)**

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