

23. Jesus Anointed at Bethany

John 12:1-19

The Gospel According to John

With many threats against the life of Jesus (John 11:53), John the Apostle wrote that, after the raising of Lazarus, Jesus withdrew with His disciples from Jerusalem to a village called Ephraim on the edge of the barren wilderness area (John 11:54). Orders had gone out from the high priest that, if anyone found out where Jesus was, they should report it so that He could be arrested (John 11:57). Such things did not intimidate the Lord Jesus; He knew that His time was in God's hands. As the time drew close for His Passover and crucifixion, He went back to Bethany, just the other side of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem:

¹Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to 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 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." 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 believing in him (John 12:1-11).

The Apostle John now devotes eight chapters of his book to the last six days of Jesus' life before the crucifixion. He considers these last few days so crucial because of the things that Jesus taught and did in that short timeframe. At the beginning of chapter twelve, Christ comes back to Bethany, no doubt checking on Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. He was aware of the danger that was gathering for Him at Jerusalem, but perhaps He was also mindful of the threat that was gathering for Lazarus as well. The chief priests had made plans to kill Lazarus because of the testimony of Christ's power in raising him from the dead (John 12:10).

Wherever Jesus went, crowds gathered. It was, therefore, safer for Lazarus to have Jesus near. Too many witnesses would spoil an assassin's plans. In the day in which we live, many believers have also encountered opposition and hatred due to their testimony of Christ's power in their lives. The enemies of God will seek to silence evidence of God's ability to change lives. The Lord Jesus is an excellent example to us of visiting His friends and being concerned for their well-being. I'm sure there was great joy in that household when Jesus knocked on the door. Can you imagine how beautiful it would be to have Jesus be a visitor at your home?□

The Home of Simon the Leper

During the time preceding the Passover, Jesus was invited to the home of Simon the Leper for a meal. If we only read John's account, we could presume that it was at Martha's house, but if we harmonize with the other Gospels, we arrive at more details. Matthew (26:6-13) and Mark (14:1-11) both record the anointing as being at the home of Simon the Leper. Luke mentions another time earlier on in Jesus' ministry when a sinful woman anointed the Lord. This occasion is thought to have happened in the Galilee area, and it is a separate incident (Luke 7:36-50) and should not be confused with the anointing by Mary, the sister of Lazarus. John tells us that the dinner was given in Jesus' honor (v. 2) and that Lazarus was also reclining at the table. Martha might have been a relative or close friend of Simon, for we see her serving Simon's guests. □

We can presume that Jesus had healed Simon of his leprosy because he was no longer a leper. There were strict laws for a person who had this disease of leprosy, one of which was they could not live among others in community (Numbers 5:1-3) and had to shout, "Unclean, unclean!" and cover the lower part of their face, wear torn clothes and ring a bell to anyone coming near them (Leviticus 13:45). The Book of Leviticus also says that a leper was to live alone (Leviticus 13:46).

Question 1) What would it be like to be a leper in Israel? Has there ever been a time in your life where you felt shunned by others or very alone?□

Scripture does not tell us if the Lord had healed Simon, but it seems likely due to the many guests at his table with Jesus' being the guest of honor. Perhaps, this dinner was Simon's way of honoring and thanking Jesus for his healing, and with Martha and others helping and Lazarus also there, this dinner was full of thankfulness to the Lord for His gracious acts.

The Anointing by Mary

Again, and again through the New Testament, we see fellowship and intimacy among believers as they shared life with the Lord at the center of their lives. The guests were reclining around a table called a Triclinium, a U-shaped table usually just a foot or two off the floor. Around the table were mattresses or couches where the guests leaned on their elbows, leaving their other hand free to be able to reach onto the low table to get the food. The Triclinium table was composed of three long tables with the open part of the U being available to the servants to bring food without disturbing or moving the guests. Often, the head of the next person alongside would be touching the chest of the person next to them (John 13:25), with the feet behind, leaving a short gap between the wall and the couches. It was this gap that now allowed Mary, the sister of Lazarus, to come behind the recliners and close to Jesus' feet with her precious treasure.

She brought with her a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume. This spikenard was unadulterated and unmixed with any other cheaper balsam. The nard was an extract from an aromatic plant, *Nardostachys jatamansi*, grown on the edge of the Himalayan mountains in Nepal. Matthew tells us (26:7) that the pure nard was sealed in an alabaster jar to keep it fresh and smelling strong for when the moment was right. Mary had not saved this precious perfume for herself; it was far too costly to spend on herself. Judas had a head for figures and calculated the cost of the perfume to be equal to a year's wages (v. 5). The Greek text says that it was worth 300 denarii, with a denarius being a day's wage; hence some translations are calling it a year's

wages for an ordinary laboring man. □

It is likely that Mary did not know the reason why she had been saving it, but inspired by the Spirit of God, she came behind the Lord reclining on the couch. I'm sure a hush fell on the guests as they saw the precious alabaster treasure in her hands. She broke the seal of the jar, and Mark wrote that Mary broke open the jar and poured it on the head of Jesus (Mark 14:3). If we would have seen her face, I feel sure we would be in tears at the love and thankfulness expressed on the woman's face — her tender love seen as she gently wiped the perfumed nard from flowing down into His eyes. □

Both Matthew and Mark record that the costly perfume was poured on Jesus' head, while John tells us that Mary poured it on the Lord's feet. There is no discrepancy here. The anointing was both to His head and His feet. Matthew and Mark do not mention that it was Mary who did this, possibly because they wrote their Gospels closer to the actual happening and wanted to protect Mary's name in a time of persecution that we know broke out at the growth of the Church after the Day of Pentecost. John wrote his Gospel nearer the end of the century. Many estimates put it at AD 96, so it could be that John did not need to protect names from any retaliation by the Jewish leadership.

What a beautiful act of devotion Mary bestowed on Jesus. She brought her treasure that she had saved and broke it open, pouring it on Jesus' head and then going to His feet and pouring out the rest of the pungent perfume. It is possible that Mary had heard of the other incident when a sinful woman had anointed Jesus while He was having supper in the house of a Pharisee. It could be that Mary desired to worship and thank the Lord in the same way (Luke 7:36-39).

Mary then did something no self-respecting Jewish woman ever did; she unclipped her hair from being tied up and allowed it all to hang loose and proceeded to wipe the perfume all over His feet with her long hair. Not a sound was heard in the room, I feel sure, as they all watched this act of pure devotion to the Lord. The whole house filled with the beautiful smell of the expensive perfume (v. 3). When she lowered her hair, Mary broke some cultural norms, which more than likely brought a gasp to the lips of some in the room. She was touching the feet of the honored guest at this meal, and not only that, but she was wiping His feet with her hair, the crown and glory of a woman (1 Corinthians 11:15), throwing all public dignity aside. Mary's heart was full of love and thankfulness to the Lord for what He had done, not only for Lazarus but also for the time that Christ had given to the three of them, gently teaching them all about the love of the Father. Appreciation, love, and thankfulness welled up with a desire to do something in return, i.e., to love in return, to give Him something in response to His love.

Here we see the power of *agape* love (self-sacrificial love) that God has bestowed on us. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). When we, indeed, see the depth of love that the Father has bestowed on us, we become lovers of God and lovers of those He loves. We are able even to love our enemies when we see how God loves us. It creates in us a heart of love in response.

Question 2) Imagine that you were a guest at this dinner. How do you think some of the guests reacted to Mary's act of devotion? What do you think the guests expected Jesus to do in response

to her actions?

The Heart of a Thief

John takes our attention away from this greatest of all expressions of love to the most significant critical words of Judas Iscariot. What a man thinks, so is he (Proverbs 23:7). The inner motivations of Judas came out in an expression of his greed and deception. Judas said: “**Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages**” (v. 5). We should not think that Judas cared for the poor, for John finds out later that Judas had been stealing from the moneybag, as he was the one that was the keeper of the bag (v. 6). Whenever he had a personal need, he dipped his hand into the everyday purse of the disciples.

When Mary broke the alabaster jar, what was in the heart of Judas, i.e., his greed, and disapproval came out for all to see and hear. He was disappointed at the loss of an opportunity to make some money. It is possible that he joined the disciples because he saw a chance to make a name for himself, but now three years on, perhaps Judas felt that it was time to get out with whatever he could still get. A year's wages had slipped from his grasp. Matthew and Mark both tell us the words of Christ in reply: □

⁶Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. ⁸She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. ⁹And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” ¹⁰Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them (Mark 14:8-10; See also Matthew 26:10-13).

There are times in one's life when we should be practical with finances, but there should also be expressions of love that at times can be costly. How much value do you place on love to Christ? If Christ has given everything, and He has, who are we to hold back anything from Him, even our precious treasures. The Lord valued this expression of love so much that He commanded that, wherever the Good News was preached, this story of devotion to Christ would also be shared. Luke also writes of this story in Luke 7:36-50.

Question 3) Do you think that Judas' habit of helping himself to the common purse that he carried could have led to his betrayal of Jesus? Discuss how one sin can lead to another.

It is no coincidence that both Matthew and Mark tell us that, after this loss of revenue, Judas went to the religious elite and asked them for money to betray Christ into their hands (Matthew 26:14; Mark 14:10). Judas' motivation for selling Christ was because he realized there was little opportunity to get anything significant from the moneybag anymore. When it comes to sin, we must be careful to lay the ax to the roots of sin and uproot it from the core of our beings, for what is not brought to the cross to be made dead will come out in what we say and do. What was inside of Judas heart came out of his lips, the fruit of which was a betrayal of his Master. The Lord put it this way:

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).

The Lord added to the criticism of Judas and the protection of Mary by saying that Mary had saved this perfume for the day of His burial. It is possible that Jesus had told Mary, Martha, and Lazarus that He planned to die at the hands of the religious elite and the Romans, that He would be buried, but after three days, He would rise again. The traditional burial was to wash the body and anoint with perfumed oil, i.e., the very thing that Mary was now bestowing on the Lord. We don't know if Mary was consciously anointing Christ for His burial, or whether she was moved by the Spirit ahead of time to do this. It could be that she was aware that this might be the last opportunity to be with Jesus.

I remember a time in 1977 when I had just become a Christian. I was at a Christian camp in the State of Virginia, USA, where God led me. For the first time in my life, I heard of the love of God and what Christ had done to redeem me and make me clean in His sight. When I understood the Gospel, I responded to the invitation and had a powerful encounter with the Spirit as I gave my life entirely to Christ. Finally, I found everything for which my empty heart was longing. My thirst for the missing piece in my life had brought me through many countries in Asia in search of God. The moment I responded, I became aware that my heart was free and clean before God. The guilt of my sin-stained life lifted off me. I didn't even know that I was carrying a heavy burden of sin, but when it lifted off me, I felt so free. I became fully alive as I had never been up to that point.

The next day, I heard about a young sister in the Lord, one who had encouraged me in my faith. She had received a prophetic word that she was to go on a short-term mission trip to Israel. Someone had contributed a small amount of money to be the first to help her purchase her airplane ticket. Inside myself, like Mary, I was reminded of a unique treasure that I had brought with me from England to the States. □

Nine months earlier I had been in India and bought a keepsake souvenir of my trip, a silver elephant inlaid with semi-precious rubies. It was not cheap. It cost me a few hundred English pounds in India. Now the thought came to me that I should give it to the young lady in the hope that she could sell it for the ticket to travel and be used of the Lord in Israel. It felt so good to part with my little Indian treasure and devote it to the Lord's work. Nothing we ever put into God's hands is wasted. I found out later that she went to Israel with the money she got for selling the silver elephant, and she was an encouragement for me also to go to Israel.

If I had never given away my treasure, perhaps I would have missed the opportunity to go to Israel myself, and I would have missed out on the much spiritual wealth of insight and knowledge that I have gained by living in that country for a year and a half. I have also taken many people back with me to that land, so the blessing continues! The Bible says to cast your bread upon the waters, and after many days, it shall return to you (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Paula Sue, if you ever read this—thanks!

Question 4) Jesus said that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Can you think

of an example of a testimony to the love of Christ or, maybe, even a case of blessing that came back to the giver?

Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the king of Israel!” ¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: ¹⁵“Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.” ¹⁶At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize these things had been written about him and done to him. ¹⁷Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!” (John 12:12-19).

John is clear as to the timing of this entry into Jerusalem. As he stated in the first verse, Christ returned to Bethany six days before the Passover (John 12:1). He also wrote that the momentous entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey was the next day (John 12:12). Mark 11:11 tells us that this arrival into Jerusalem happened in the late afternoon or early evening:

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but **since it was already late**, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve (Mark 11:11).

It also seems significant that John wrote that the last Passover supper of Jesus with His disciples was held the day before the main Passover held in Jerusalem: “**It was just before the Passover Feast**” (John 13:1). The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that, around the time of Christ, over a quarter of a million lambs were sacrificed over a two-hour time frame before sunset Passover eve. That’s a lot of lambs in just two hours. How could that all happen in such a short time? In helping us to understand the time frame, John MacArthur, in his book, *The Murder of Jesus*, wrote about the timing of Passover:

The Jews of Jesus’ day had two different methods of reckoning the calendar, however, and this helped alleviate the problem. The Pharisees, as well as the Jews from Galilee and the northern districts of Israel, counted their days from sunrise to sunrise. But the Sadducees, and people from Jerusalem and the surrounding districts calculated days from sundown to sundown. That meant 14 Nisan [Passover] for a Galilean fell on Thursday, while 14 Nisan for the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell on Friday. (That twist in the chronology explains why Jesus and His disciples, all Galileans, ate the Passover meal on Thursday evening in the Upper Room, yet John 18:28 records that the Jewish leaders, all residents of Jerusalem, had not yet celebrated Passover on the following day when Jesus appeared before Pontius Pilate in the Praetorium. It also explains why John 19:14 indicates that Jesus’ trial and crucifixion took place on the day of Preparation for the Passover.)¹

¹ John MacArthur, *The Murder of Jesus*, Nelson Books, Nashville, TN. Pages 26-27.

Why am I laboring on this point about timing in John's Gospel? The timing is significant because the Passover lamb had to be brought into the house of those preparing for Passover four days before the lamb was sacrificed:

...on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. ⁴If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. ⁵The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. ⁶Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight (Exodus 12:3-6).

The lamb had to be one-year-old (Exodus 12:5) and examined for four days before the Passover sacrifice (v. 3). The Lord Jesus fulfilled this Passover lamb type requirement in detail by entering into Jerusalem four days ahead of the Passover so that He could be inspected for four days ahead of the fourteenth day of Nisan. □

Imagine what it was like for each Israelite family to take care of the lamb for four days. The children may have even become attached to the lamb. After four days of close inspection and taking care of this little lamb, it must have broken their hearts to take that little lamb then and shed its blood on the evening of the 14 Nisan as a substitute for each of them. God would only accept a lamb without blemish and spot, i.e., a lamb carefully examined as to its perfection. The blood of the lamb they sacrificed cost them dearly. The Lord Jesus fulfilled this description in every way. He is our Passover lamb. □

There was also a prophecy in the Book of Daniel that, from the declaration to rebuild Jerusalem until the coming of the Messiah (Messiah means "Anointed One"), there would be sixty-nine weeks of years or 173,880 days.

"Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble (Daniel 9:25).

Smarter people than myself have sat down and estimated that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey at precisely 173,880 days after the commandment was given to rebuild Jerusalem, ultimately fulfilling the above prophecy.² The very day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey was precisely the day that was foretold by the prophet Daniel. I'm sure that there were intelligent people among the ruling elite, the High Priest, Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Scribes, who were acutely aware of this prophetic event, and maybe the ordinary everyday people in the street as well.

² <http://www.aboutbibleprophecy.com/weeks.htm>

When Jesus left Bethany, He deliberately rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. The Scripture had to be fulfilled even if His disciples were not aware of it until afterward (John 12:16).□

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

The King of Israel did not come riding on a white horse of conquest, but on a humble beast of burden, just as the Scriptures foretold. There was a great crowd that came to Jerusalem for the Feast but left the city and welcomed Him as He descended the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem. Those who tried to quiet down the disciple's emotions as He rode, said, “ ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’ ‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out’ ” (Luke 19:39-40). So great was the number of people who welcomed the Messiah that the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after Him” (John 12:19).

It is essential for us to note that Jesus did not rebuke Mary for anointing Him with her expensive perfume, and He did not rebuke the crowd for welcoming Him and shouting praises. In both instances, we have these acts of worship, and adoration to the Lord recorded in Scripture, and in this way, their worship is remembered for all time. Do you believe that God remembers your words of praise, your tears of devotion? It ascends to the Lord as a sacrifice of praise. He treasures your words of praise and your devotion, especially when we choose to praise Him amid our difficulties.□

As we conclude our study today, let me leave you with this question: how will you express your worship and devotion to Christ?

Prayer: Father, please help us always to have the heart to worship like Mary, laying down our treasures for Your glory. May we receive Your Son and be ready for Him when He comes to us. Amen

Keith Thomas.

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com