

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Anointing at Bethany

by Dan Trygg

Once again, John gives us a little more insight into the events recorded by the other gospel writers. **The resurrection of Lazarus at Bethany was virtually explosive in its impact.** Since Bethany was so near to Jerusalem, and because Lazarus' family was evidently a prominent family, the report of his death would have rapidly spread throughout the city. Obviously, **the Pharisees and Sadducees could no longer control the sentiment and thinking of the common people.** Their worst fears were being realized, as the story was carried throughout Jerusalem, and speculation about Jesus was rampant. **Their fear was that if Jesus was proclaimed to be the Christ-King, and started an insurrection, the Romans would defend their interests by force.** (They painted the most extreme situation in their imagination. The entire removal of the populace was not a normal practice with the Romans, although it *had* happened to Israel before. It would nevertheless be a bloody slaughter, for the Romans were quite ruthless in putting down such revolts.) **Their real fear, however, was the loss of their own prestige and influence** if such a scenario would unfold. **Caiaphas, the high priest, unwittingly prophesied that it was expedient "...that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish"** (11:50,51). After the chief priests and Pharisees had definitely decided to kill Jesus, we read in the last few verses of chapter eleven that Jesus withdrew from Jerusalem to stay in a city called Ephraim, located about twelve miles north northeast of Jerusalem, a fairly isolated place in a mountainous region on the edge of the wilderness. **The Passover feast was near, so pilgrims began to stream into Jerusalem.** They were waiting for Jesus to arrive, but some wondered if He would come at all, probably being aware of the potential risk it was for Him. Meanwhile, **the chief priests were attempting to ascertain His whereabouts so that they might arrest Him.**

Having provided this background, John begins his account of the events immediately leading up to Jesus' death. He first recounts the incident of the woman who anointed Him with very costly perfume, an event that was significant for several reasons. We find information supplied by John that the other gospel writers did not include (Matt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9), information which adds depth and richness to the story.

"Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany" (12:1). **Only John supplies the information that gives us a chronology of these events.** In both Mark and Matthew, the anointing of Jesus is presented as a flashback ("Now *when* Jesus was in Bethany..." [Matt. 26:6]; "And *while* He was in Bethany..." [Mk. 14:3]), recounted much later in the unfolding of events, when Passover was only *two* days off (Matt. 26:2; Mk. 14:1). **If not for John's gospel we would not know that this supper took place immediately before the triumphal entry** (cf. vs. 12), **nor would we be able to establish that date as "Palm Sunday"**. The Jews reckoned their days from sundown to sundown. The Sabbath, then would begin at sundown on Friday, and end with the setting of the sun on Saturday. **This dinner would have been Saturday evening, probably after sundown,** so that Jesus and the disciples would not break the Sabbath restrictions against travel. **It would have been one of the quietest times of the week.** Very few travelers would be out on the roads. Virtually everyone would simply stay home after sundown ending the Sabbath day. **This allowed Jesus to come to Bethany undetected.** **"...where Lazarus was..."** Not only were they always welcome there, especially after raising Lazarus from the dead, but Jesus probably had a natural desire to check on his dear friends. Their home in Bethany offered a strategic location from which to commute back and forth to Jerusalem during the week before Passover (cf. Mk. 11:1,11,12,19,20,27; 14:3; Matt. 21:17).

"So they made Him a supper there" (vs. 2). This would be common hospitality for weary travelers. We find out from the other gospel writers that **this meal took place at the "home of Simon the leper", probably the father of these three siblings** (Matt. 26:6; Mk. 14:3). We know nothing more about this man. It was a good way to identify the house and family. If this Simon had been a wealthy, prominent person, getting leprosy would have been a tragedy that would have singled out this family in people's minds. The "home of Simon the leper" would have then immediately brought to mind the exact family and their house. **"...and Martha was serving..."** From Lk. 10:38-42 we know that this was typical of her. The fact that both women had to *serve* in the house indicates that whatever wealth the family may once have had, they apparently could not afford house servants to do this work. **"Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him."** He who had died was now once again enjoying life in fellowship with Jesus, bringing wonderful closure to the account of his death and resurrection. Probably seeing Lazarus healthy and full of life at table with Jesus moved Mary to do as she did.

"Mary therefore took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard..." (vs. 3). **John identifies the woman who was unnamed in the other accounts.** Now, for the first time, we understand what motivated her lavish action. (Note that

both the setting and the motivation of the woman in Lk. 7:36-50 is quite different. These are two entirely unrelated incidents which should not be linked together.) The cost of the perfume is the equivalent of 300 day's wages (vs. 5). It was very costly, indeed. However, **Mary is motivated by deep love and gratitude for the return of her brother from the dead.** *Nothing* is too extravagant for the expression of her heart. **"...and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair..."** The parallels record that she poured it over His head (Matt. 26:7; Mk. 14:3). Again, John is telling us the rest of the story. Mid-eastern hospitality at its best would offer oil to anoint one's head, and water to wash one's feet, to refresh the guest from the harshness of travel on the dry, dusty roads (cf. Lk. 7:44-46; Jn. 13:1-15). **Mary's action highly exalted Jesus among the guests,** and the composition of the ointment would have been more physically invigorating than mere water. By wiping His feet with her hair, she was doing nothing inappropriate or sexually suggestive. She was putting herself in the role of one of the lowliest of servants to wash His feet. Using her hair signified her willing devotion to humbly serve Him. **It also expressed her desire to be identified with Him as her Lord,** for they both would have had the same fragrance. **"...and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."** The use of an entire 12 ounce vial of perfumed oil certainly would have immediately permeated the house with the wonderful fragrance of the nard. Nard, or spikenard, is from the roots of a plant that grows in the Himalayan mountains of India. It was so costly because it was rare to begin with, but then it also had to be imported from India in special jars of alabaster, carefully sealed to preserve the perfume. Usually it would remain sealed until a special occasion where the owner would use it to anoint special guests. **To have such a treasure in one's possession suggests that someone in the family must have had significant wealth,** for it was a luxury item that only the wealthy could afford to purchase and then fully expend. The strength and unique fragrance of the smell would have immediately betrayed its expensive quality to everyone present.

"But Judas Iscariot... said..." (vss. 4,5). In the other accounts, *all* of the disciples were offended and indignant at the waste of this expensive commodity in this way. **John indicates that Judas was the one who primarily gave voice to the criticism,** though they were all apparently expressing similar sentiments (Matt. 26:8,9). "...who was intending to betray Him..." Apparently this event finally pushed Judas to act on his thoughts, for he went to strike his infamous bargain with the chief priests *immediately after* this controversy over Mary's action. **"Why was this perfume not sold... and given to poor people?"** The crux of the criticism was this, "Wouldn't more be accomplished by selling off such extravagances and using the money in a more pragmatic, helpful way?" **For us, the question comes to be, "How utilitarian does God want us to be with the resources He gives us? Are we never to have or give nice things, ...things that go beyond the basic utilitarian function? Or, are we obliged to cut all the 'fat' from our budget and activities, because we are obliged to give every extra penny to the poor?"**

From verse 6, we find out that Judas had some serious character defects before he decided to betray Jesus. He evidently served as group treasurer, but *was a thief* and regularly embezzled funds from the money box he carried. **In reality, it was money, and probably power, that were important to him, ...not people.** What was he doing with the extra money? Extra food? Clothes? Was he a gambler? Was he saving it to invest in something? (Acts 1:18)

"Jesus therefore said, 'Let her alone...'"(vs. 7). **This rebuke, or command, was directed toward Judas,** since Jesus used a verb that is singular in form, ("You [singular] leave her"). Verse 8 is directed to the entire group (you [plural]). The parallel accounts record Jesus rebuking the entire group, e.g., "Why do you (plural) bother the woman?" (Matt. 26:10). Evidently, though the entire group was scolding Mary (Mk. 14:5), Judas' vehement tone or actions were inordinately angry, threatening, or attacking, so that Jesus felt it necessary to specifically stop him. **"...in order that she might keep it for the day of my burial."** I think what Jesus is saying is, **"Don't spoil what she has done by your criticizing. What she did was a good work for my benefit.** She did what she could. She has anointed my body for burial." (Cf. Matt. 26:10-12; Mk. 14:6-8). "Allow her to keep and savor her joy in giving, without spoiling it with *pointless* criticism." After all, it was an *academic issue,* since *the perfume could not be gathered into the bottle again.*

"For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me" (vs. 8). It was not an either/or choice that Mary made. There were many ongoing opportunities to help the poor. Those who follow Jesus *will* help them. *This, however, was a special occasion justifying an unusual expression of generosity.* **Jesus here freed us from bondage to duty, allowing us to express our special affection, or special honor, for some individuals** in ways that go beyond the ordinary. It is one way in which we can outwardly express our hearts. **Jesus is not saying that the poor are unimportant.** A balanced view of this would be that **those who are regularly responsible to assist the poor can expect that an occasional "lavish" act of celebration or honor is acceptable and pleasing to God.** There will always be people who will question the propriety of this, however. Cf. Rom. 14:22.

We see again from verses 9-11 the impact of Lazarus' resurrection. Having heard that Jesus was staying there, people came by to not only see *Him*, but *Lazarus* too. **The chief priests deliberated in order that they might kill Lazarus, because of the attention he brought to Jesus.** Note that it was *only the priests* here, not the entire counsel. If Lazarus was from a priestly family, he may have been especially embarrassing to them.