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# The anointing at Bethany

*"Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil."*

John 12:1-3

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## Worship is the *anointing* of the Lord

A beautiful Biblical example of worship is found in John 12. The Lord was going to die, and Mary of Bethany knew this because she had sat at the Lord's feet and received His teaching. She felt what was going to happen. Therefore she wanted to anoint Him, i.e. embalm Him for the purpose of His burial. The Lord recognized this and He expressed His great appreciation for her act of love. Mary had kept her precious spikenard "for the day of His burial" (John 12:7). Thus, the purpose of the anointing was the embalming of His body! This is confirmed by the account of the evangelists Matthew and Mark: Mary anointed His body in advance of the burial of our Lord (Matt. 26:12; Mark 14:8).

This anointing was not for the purpose of appointing Him to a particular position, as was customary under the Old Covenant. Then people were anointed as kings, priests, or prophets. Of course, Christ was anointed King, Priest, and Prophet. That was done by God Himself, and indeed the Lord holds all these offices. But anointing Him as the One who died is something else! It means – and this is the symbolic

value of Mary's act for ourselves – that we honor Him as the One who died for us, that we remember Him in His suffering and death, and proclaim His death until He comes. It is not ourselves as those who were formerly dead, but were raised to new life by Him (as is shown in Lazarus), that are the focus of the scene. It is the Lord Himself, Who came to lay down His life. It is the Prince of Life, Who voluntarily entered into death to take up His life again on the other side of death and the grave (John 10:17-18; Acts 3:15).

## Passover and Supper

The Passover was the feast of Israel's redemption from Egypt. So the Lord's Supper is the feast of our deliverance from the present evil world. We are saved from judgment; we were dead and have become alive again. But the Lord's Supper is especially in remembrance of Him. This meal is for the One who loved us to death, and the purpose is to honor and magnify Him. Compare this with the great wedding supper that the King – a picture of God the Father – prepared for His Son (Matt. 22:2). And we can also think of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus was initially just one of the guests (together with His disciples). But He became the central figure there, however, as soon as He changed the water into wine and thus revealed His glory (John 2:11). That divine glory was likewise revealed in the raising of Lazarus (John 11:4, 40).

In keeping with this, it is a fitting detail in the account of the evangelist John that Mary here – where the Son revealed His divine glory – anointed only the feet of Jesus (John 12:3). She also dried His feet with her hair; and so she deposited her honor, her glory at His feet (cf. 1 Cor. 11:15). According to Matthew and Mark, where we see the Lord as the King and the Servant-Prophet respectively, it was also true that the oil was poured out on His head. No doubt in this event both the Lord's head and feet were anointed, but John's rendering is in accordance with the exalted character in which He is shown in this Gospel.

## Worship costs us everything

Only Mark mentions that the alabaster flask with precious spikenard was broken (Mark 14:3). This was a symbolic act, with a deep meaning. Worship costs us

everything. Christ sacrificed His life. He was "bruised" for our iniquities and the precious sacrifice of His life was poured out unto death (Isa. 53:5, 12). It is no different with the precious treasure, which we as believers carry with us in our bodies. These "earthen vessels" are delivered to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:7-18; cf. the breaking of the jars by Gideon's men in Judges 7:16ff.).

Further, in John 12 we see with Martha the work of service. Martha served (John 12:2), as she did in her own home (Luke 10:40). Here, however, she was no longer preoccupied with the importance and significance of her own service; everything now happened in harmony with the Master. Lazarus shows the aspect of communion, of sitting down and lying down in the presence of the Lord. In Mary, who in Luke 10 sat at the feet of the Lord to listen to His word, we have here clearly the aspect of worship. One cannot exist without the other: listening to His word leads to the worship of His Person. Communion, service, and worship in the presence of the Master: these are the three things that characterize us as members of God's family.

## A good work to Him

The act of love by Mary had two effects. First, the fragrance of the spikenard filled the house. There was an elevated atmosphere, reminiscent of that in the sanctuary where the priests did daily service and lit fragrant incense on the golden altar (Ex. 30:7-8). This brings us to the question of the families of believers in our day. Is Christ the exalted Guest there? Is the anointing oil of worship a reality there? What about our congregations? Are they, as true temples of the living God, filled with the fragrance of the adoration of the Lamb?

However, this was followed by the reaction of Judas Iscariot and the rest of the disciples. The light of Christ made all things manifest and also showed the corruption of the human heart: for Judas was a thief (John 12:6). The Lord would not always be with them here on earth; the poor would always be there. He would return to the Father and henceforth be the center of heavenly glory. Mary had done a good work for Him, while it was still possible here on earth. This good work was a work for Him personally, an act that expressed her personal love and esteem for Him (Matt. 26:10; Mark 14:6). This is an important example for us as Christians. In the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we can offer the precious spikenard of our worship to Him and gladden the Master's heart with offerings of praise and

thanksgiving (cf. Song 1:12). And we ourselves do not lack anything: the fragrance of the costly oil in the house of God also gladdens our hearts. So here on earth we have a foretaste of the heavenly wedding banquet, the wedding of the Lamb (Rev. 19).

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