

I. Setting the Stage for Passover (11:55-12:50)

John didn't specify the time interval between the raising of Lazarus and the Passover, but his transition (ref. 11:55a) suggests that the two occurred fairly close together. The wider account reinforces this, since it places the Lazarus episode after the Feast of Dedication, which, depending on the year, precedes Passover by about fourteen weeks. Whatever the actual interval, John constructed his record so as to tightly conjoin Lazarus' raising with Passover – specifically Jesus' final Passover during which He was crucified and resurrected. John discerned in the Lazarus episode a prefiguration of Jesus' own death and resurrection with its fruit in life out of death for the world, and thus he closely conjoined the two. Passover represented life out of death for Israel – a new birth into a living hope wrought by Yahweh's judgment and liberating hand according to His covenant faithfulness to Abraham; Jesus was going to transform Passover such that this representation would extend to the whole world, and not merely in physical terms, but in the eschatological, spiritual terms the physical phenomena symbolized and prefigured.

John introduced this context by noting that people had already begun arriving in Jerusalem in preparation for the Passover (11:55). Again, Passover was the first of three annual feasts which required every able-bodied Israelite male to be present in Jerusalem. The second was the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and its proximity to Passover resulted in many worshippers remaining in Jerusalem during the fifty-day interval separating these two feasts. John further recorded that the talk on the street concerned Jesus; the people and rulers looked for Him and wondered whether He would come to Jerusalem for the feast. Evidently His absence from Judea hadn't gone unnoticed and the reason for it was widely understood. The rulers were watching for Jesus in order to arrest Him and they'd issued an order among the people that anyone who saw Him was to report it. Everyone knew what awaited Jesus if He came to the feast and so a primary topic of discussion was whether He would dare to show His face in Jerusalem, even though the Passover law required Him to be there.

1. Jesus also knew what awaited Him at the feast, but, so far from keeping Him away, that fate was precisely His reason for coming; the completion of His work in fulfillment of the Scriptures depended on the Jews' satisfying their designs during Passover. For the Passover commemorated the Exodus event which itself served a critical typological function in Israel's history; the prophets in general, and Isaiah in particular, had long promised another day when Yahweh would again arise to liberate and gather to Himself Abraham's covenant children. The first Exodus was the pledge of a second one, the latter securing, not merely a physical and temporal deliverance and ingathering, but an ultimate and everlasting one. When Yahweh again rose up to redeem His enslaved people, slaying Rahab the dragon and opening a path of deliverance and ingathering, they would return to Him in truth with everlasting joy on their heads (Isaiah 51:1-11; cf. 33:13-35:10).
 - a. Jesus understood the nature and significance of His mission as revealed in the Scriptures and therefore the timing of its particulars culminating with His redemptive self-offering. The impending Passover meant that His hour would soon be at hand and thus He began His final journey traveling from Ephraim to Jerusalem. John recorded that Jesus didn't go directly to Jerusalem, but stopped in Bethany, arriving there six days before the start of the feast (12:1).

There Jesus participated in a dinner held in His honor. John didn't specify the location of that meal, but his account gives the impression that it occurred in the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha (ref. 12:2-3). However, Matthew and Mark's parallel records state that this dinner took place in the home of a man named Simon. They further identified this man as a leper (cf. Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9) and their accounts suggest both that he had long suffered from leprosy (hence the title, *Simon the leper*) and that Jesus had healed him sometime previously (indicated by the dinner being held in his home; ref. Leviticus 13-14). John didn't mention Simon and the two synoptic accounts provide no other information; moreover, no person by this name is mentioned elsewhere in the four gospel texts, making it impossible to further identify him. Some have pointed to Luke's story of the ten healed lepers and the one individual who returned to give thanks to Jesus, but this man was a Samaritan, not a Judean (ref. Luke 17:11-19). What is clear is that Jesus healed countless lepers during His ministry in Israel – whether personally or through His disciples (cf. Matthew 9:35, 10:1-8, 11:1-5; Luke 6:17-19) – and this man Simon was apparently one of them.

- b. Simon hosted this dinner in his home, but John recorded that Lazarus and his sisters were present. In fact, Martha was overseeing the meal and its service and John seems to suggest that it was the three siblings who wanted to honor Jesus in this way (“*they* made Him a dinner”). It's possible Simon permitted them to host the dinner in his home because his house could accommodate more guests. Lazarus was a prominent man and Jesus had raised him from the dead; certainly everyone in the vicinity would have wanted to be there that night (cf. 12:9).

Martha, the practical servant (note again Luke 10:38-42), demonstrated her love and devotion by serving Jesus a meal, but Mary chose a different means: This one who'd sat at Jesus' feet in humble adoration now expressed her devotion by anointing Him with a vial of costly oil (12:3). John described this as a pound of perfume of pure nard worth at least three hundred denarii (cf. Mark 14:4-5), which was nearly a year's wage (ref. Matthew 20:1-2). He also described this anointing in terms of Mary applying the oil to Jesus' feet, while Matthew and Mark recorded that she poured it onto His head. This difference is easily resolved when one considers the orientation of John's treatment of the episode: He focused on the oil dripping onto Jesus' feet rather than it being poured onto His head because he wanted to highlight Mary's utter devotion in anointing Him. It was demeaning to touch and wash a person's dirty feet and so this task was relegated to the lowest house slave. But Mary wasn't merely touching Jesus' feet; she was pressing her face against them. Even more, she was using her loosened hair to wipe His feet. The significance of this action is easily lost on modern readers: A Jewish woman's hair symbolized her dignity and modesty and only prostitutes let it down in public. Mary not only humiliated herself by loosening her hair in front of the dinner guests, she used her hair – her “glory” – to wipe the dirt-smeared oil from Jesus' feet. She was doing far more than honoring Jesus with the gift of costly perfumed oil; oblivious to those around her and unconcerned with what they would think, Mary was giving her Lord the gift of her whole self.

John's account thus sets in sharp contrast Mary's devotion and its absence in others who witnessed her actions. These individuals were deeply moved by what they observed, but moved to *resentment*, not adoration and worship. John focused on Judas Iscariot, but Matthew and Mark included others – if not all – of the disciples. These followers of Jesus saw Mary's action, not as a proper and profound act of devotion, but an irresponsible waste. In their minds, this precious nard should have been sold to provide aid to the poor. In the case of Judas, at least, this concern was a ruse; he didn't care about the needy, but his own "need": He wanted to see some of the proceeds from the sale of the nard end up in his own pocket (12:4-6; cf. Matthew 26:8-9; Mark 14:4-5).

- c. Jesus' disciples joined together in voicing their indignation that Mary would do such a wasteful thing, but He rebuked them and told them to leave her alone. Just as He'd refused to let Mary be stripped of the better thing – the "good part" – she'd chosen when she sat at His feet, so it was on this day; what she'd done with the perfumed oil was good and proper. Yes, seeking to meet the needs of unfortunates was a good thing and Jesus had always insisted on it, but anointing Him was the greater good. This was true first of all because of *timeliness*: The nature of this world insures perpetual opportunity to minister to the poor, but it was not so with His anointing; this was a singular opportunity that would not appear again. That day was a unique occasion which warranted Mary's extravagant act, but especially because of what it *signified*. Whatever Mary may have intended by it, Jesus viewed this anointing in terms of His impending death: *She has kept this unto the day of My burial preparation* (12:7).

Some have interpreted this statement as Jesus (and John) indicating that this oil was to be used in preparing His body after His death. Thus it couldn't be sold, because the portion that remained needed to be kept for the day of His burial. But Mark's account states that the alabaster container was broken and all of the oil poured onto Jesus' head. An important interpretive key is the verb rendered *keep*: In context, it refers to an *observance* (as in keeping a feast), not preserving or safeguarding something. Jesus wasn't saying that Mary was going to keep the oil for His burial, but that she had performed – *observed* – this anointing in view of His burial (cf. the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark). Whether or not Mary conceived her action in this way, Jesus wanted those who observed it to so interpret it. Her act of honor and devotion anticipated the coming climactic day of Jesus' self-offering; even as the perfumed oil poured out of the broken jar filled the house with its fragrance, so Jesus was going to pour out His life, giving His body to be broken, so that His outpouring would see the whole world filled with His aroma through those made to share in His life (2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

- d. John provided no further insight into the dinner or the guests' reaction to Jesus' comments. His concern was with the anointing and Jesus' interpretation of it; these were the features of the episode which he considered important to the case he was building regarding Jesus' death and its significance: He had come to give life to the world, and He would do so through His death (ref. again 12:49ff).

And so John immediately turned his attention from the dinner to the general circumstances surrounding Lazarus' resurrection and Jesus' presence in Bethany (12:9-11). Both drew the attention of the people in and around Jerusalem and this attention yielded the same results John emphasized throughout his account: Some embraced Jesus as Israel's Messiah and others renounced Him and sought to eliminate Him as a threat to the nation's well-being. Thus John's summary in verses 9-11 provides a kind of bookend to Caiaphas' previous prophetic observation: The concern the council had voiced was being realized – Jesus was indeed continuing to build His following (12:48), and this unfortunate situation only reinforced the wisdom of Caiaphas' resolution; this false messiah had to die.

Jesus needed to be eliminated, but so did the movement He was building. More followers meant more visibility to Rome and so greater jeopardy for the nation, Jerusalem and the temple. Eradicating all of Jesus' disciples was impractical, but they could try to halt further growth in their numbers. The news of Lazarus' raising was spreading like wildfire – especially with so many gathering for Passover – and multitudes were coming to Jesus because of it. The obvious answer was to eliminate Lazarus and, with him, the proof of his resurrection. Yes, killing him was risky; Lazarus' experience had made him a celebrity and, beyond that, he was a prominent and beloved man and his execution would surely elicit a violent outcry from the people. But that sort of unrest was nothing compared with what the Romans would bring if this situation was allowed to continue.

John's gospel, like his counterparts, has its gaze set toward Calvary and its outcome. He carefully crafted his account with the understanding that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-promised Messiah sent by Israel's God to give life to the world. And that life was to flow from His own death and resurrection. Thus this section of his narrative serves both to frame Jesus' impending death and its significance and also amplify the tension leading up to it. Now, only days away from the fateful Passover, Yahweh was making the necessary preparations for the offering of His Passover lamb. The Romans would execute Jesus as a rebel king, but as the reluctant, even coerced hand of the rebellious covenant house (cf. Matthew 27:11-25; Mark 15:1-14; Luke 23:1-23 with Acts 2:22-23). Rome would judge Jesus to be a pathetic figure, deluded yet harmless; Israel had judged Him to be a false messiah and lethal threat to Yahweh's nation and house. Though their perceptions and assessments differed, neither nation saw Jesus in truth: the King of Israel sent by Israel's God to redeem and reconstitute Abraham's house such that His blessing should at last flow out to all the earth's families. Willful unbelief blinded both nations, but Israel's sin was far worse: *In the greatest of ironies, their rejection of Jesus as their king – which they conceived as faithfulness to the covenant God they confessed as King – was their rejection of that God and His kingship.* Yahweh's kingship was fundamental to Israel's existence and self-identity and for many centuries they'd known of His will, revealed by His prophets, to execute His everlasting rule through the messianic son of David. Therefore, to reject the Messiah and his rule and kingdom was to reject Yahweh Himself. Though Israel would have vehemently denied that this was what they were doing in rejecting Jesus, their own words proved it. When the moment came to confess Jesus as Yahweh's messianic king, they insisted they had no king but Caesar (ref. 19:1-15).