

Exegetical Notes, John 12:1-11
“Arrival in Bethany”

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John 12:1-11

Verse 1

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

- During the last week of Jesus’ life he stayed in Bethany at the house of his good friend Lazarus. This text discusses the first day of Jesus’ visit at Lazarus’ home.
- Previously, Lazarus had become sick and died. Jesus raised him from the dead. See John 11 for that story.

Verse 2

Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.

- Lazarus held a dinner party on the evening of Jesus’ arrival in Bethany. His sister, Martha, who lived in Lazarus house, was in charge of the preparations and the serving of the meal.

Verse 3

Then 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.

- Nard is the name of a plant from which an expensive perfume was extracted. A pint of such perfume would have been very costly.
- Mary, Lazarus’ other sister, poured the entire pint of perfume on Jesus’ feet. This is extremely unusual. Normally, the head was anointed with perfume, not the feet. Mary then wiped Jesus’ feet dry with her hair. This was very abnormal. Polite, well-bred women in Jesus’ day did not unbraided their hair in public. A woman who wore her hair down would have been taken for a prostitute. Mary’s action would have been considered scandalous as well as extravagant.

- The meaning of Mary’s action is difficult to fully understand. First, it is an act of humility. When a guest arrived, in a proper Jewish home at that time, servants washed the guest’s feet. While it is reasonable to assume that Lazarus’ servants washed the feet of all his guests, including Jesus, Mary plays the part of a servant by washing Jesus’ feet again. She was Lazarus’ sister, yet she plays the role of a servant by washing Jesus’ feet. Second, it is an act of devotion. Jesus had raised her brother from the dead. Mary was exceptionally grateful to Jesus. She pours the expensive perfume on his feet to show the extent of her gratitude.

Verse 4-6

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” He 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.

- There were probably many people who found Mary’s behavior questionable. However, it was only Judas Iscariot who verbally objected. He questioned what Mary did because of its extravagance. He pointed out that Mary’s perfume could have been sold for a year’s wages and the money gotten for it used to help the poor.
- The text tells us the Judas’ real concern was potential access to the money gotten from the perfume not any real concern for the poor.

Verse 7-8

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

- Jesus told Judas to stop criticizing Mary because of what she had done. He said that she had saved the perfume for the day of his burial. The phrase, “day of,” is best translated, “time of.” He was saying that the time of his burial was at hand. Perfumes and spices were used to prepare bodies for burial. In saying this, Jesus indicates that he knew that his death was only a few days away.
- Jesus’ remark about the poor simply means that there is always an opportunity to help the poor. However, the time of his death was immediate. Mary’s act was appropriate because of the immediacy of his death.

Verse 9-11

Meanwhile 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. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him

- In those times, dinner parties collected a great deal of attention. People gathered outside of wealthy homes to watch the guests come to the party. Lazarus was a wealthy man. People would have gathered to watch his guests come and go. But the crowd was made even larger when it was learned that Jesus was among the guests. The people wanted to see him about whom they had heard so much. And since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, Lazarus was also a bit of a celebrity.
- Jesus' popularity, as well as that of Lazarus, bothered the chief priests. The priests laid plans to kill both Jesus and Lazarus.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Days of the Passion: Arrival in Bethany*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)