

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

MATT. 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name **JESUS**: for he shall save his people from their sins.

JOHN 12:1 Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead.

2 There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him.

3 Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.

4 Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray him,

5 Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?

6 This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.

7 Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this.

8 For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always.

NOTES

Sorrow Before Triumph

Lesson Text: Matthew 1:18-21; John 12:1-8

Related Scriptures: Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:37-39

TIMES: 6 or 5 B.C.; A.D. 30

PLACES: Nazareth; Bethany

~~~~~  
**GOLDEN TEXT**—“Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her” (Matthew 26:13).  
~~~~~

Lesson Exposition

A MOMENTOUS ANNOUNCEMENT—Matt. 1:18-21

Mary’s condition (Matt. 1:18). Since Matthew’s Gospel was addressed to a Jewish audience, the author is careful to trace the lineage of Jesus, as He was “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1).

The narrative begins by telling us that Joseph and Mary were promised in marriage to each other. While today we might use the words “betrothed” or “engaged” for their status, neither term accurately describes their relationship. Betrothal in New Testament Jewish culture was a legal arrangement made about one year before the actual marriage ceremony and consummation. To remove oneself from such a betrothal required a legal divorce.

At some point it was discovered that Mary was with child. The conception had come about by the power of the Holy Spirit. In both Matthew’s and Luke’s account of the birth of Christ, there is no doubt that Mary was a virgin at both the time of the conception and the time of Jesus’ birth (Matt. 1:25).

Joseph’s dilemma (Matt. 1:19-21).

Since Joseph was a godly man, he did not wish to be married to a woman who had presumably been unfaithful to him with another man during their betrothal. Nor did he wish to disgrace Mary publicly or have her punished for her assumed unfaithfulness. Rather, he was “minded to put her away privately”; that is, he intended to divorce her secretly. Note that Joseph is referred to here as Mary’s husband, reflecting what was stated earlier concerning the binding nature of espousal.

Rather than making a hasty decision about his future with Mary, Joseph “thought on these things,” mulling them over in his mind (vs. 20). No doubt he experienced many emotions, everything from anger, to sorrow, to confusion, to despair. Exactly how Joseph had discovered Mary’s pregnancy is not stated, though it is likely that Mary herself told him, perhaps sharing the details of how the angel Gabriel had appeared to her (Luke 1:26-38).

It was while Joseph was considering the dilemma in which he found himself that an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Encouraging him not to be afraid

to wed Mary, the angel revealed that the child in Mary's womb actually was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20). Joseph was further instructed that the child was to be given the name Jesus, which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "the Lord saves"—an apt name indeed for the One who would "save his people from their sins" (vs. 21).

EXTRAORDINARY DEVOTION— John 12:1-3

The setting (John 12:1). With a few exceptions, the bulk of our lesson material this quarter comes from the latter part of the Gospel of John, focusing mostly on events that occurred during the final week of the Saviour's earthly life.

As John 12 opens, it was six days before the Passover, the annual spring festival commemorating Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage.

Bethany was a village just outside Jerusalem and the home to a family who were Jesus' good friends: Mary, her sister Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Lazarus, of course, had just been raised from the dead (cf. 11:38-44).

Extravagant devotion (John 12:2-3). Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9 also mention an anointing of Jesus at Bethany, although in those accounts the ointment is administered to Jesus by an unnamed woman who is mentioned only as anointing His head. There are so many similarities between these accounts that it is generally accepted that they describe the same event. The differences in their details are easily reconciled by reasonably supposing a difference in emphasis and perspective by the various narrators. But the accounts of this particular anointing should not be confused with a separate anointing by a sinful woman recorded in Luke 7:36-50.

From the parallel passages in Mat-

thew and Mark, we learn that the dinner John describes took place in the home of a man called Simon the leper. It may be that Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Simon all lived in the same dwelling.

According to John 12:3, Mary took a pound of spikenard and anointed Jesus' feet with it. The parallel passages in Matthew and Mark mention that she also anointed His head. Spikenard is a perfume derived from a plant that grows only in the Himalayan mountains of India, Nepal, and China, and it is still very expensive today in its pure, organic form. Even if Mary belonged to a wealthy family, this would have represented a very extravagant gesture of devotion.

Showing her profound devotion and love for Jesus, Mary further honored Him by wiping His feet with her hair. As an eyewitness to these events, John mentions the aroma of the ointment filling the room where they were dining. The memory of fragrance is very powerful and persistent; if all those present ever got a whiff of spikenard in the future, they would surely be reminded of Mary's demonstration of devotion.

A DUPLICITOUS OBJECTION— John 12:4-8

Complaint (John 12:4-6). In the other accounts of this incident, Jesus' disciples collectively protested the extravagance of Mary's act of devotion. John's Gospel, however, makes it clear that it was Judas who complained most conspicuously about it.

When we hear the name Judas, we nearly always think of the disciple who betrayed Christ. Matthew and Mark both juxtapose this incident with Judas's act of making himself available to the chief priests to betray Jesus (Matt. 26:14-15; Mark 14:10-11). In the KJV New Testament, the name Judas appears some 33 times. The Greek name *Judas* is

variously rendered “Jude,” “Judah,” “Juda,” and of course, “Judas.”

As to the meaning of “Isca-riot” (John 12:4), there is some debate. Most scholars hold that it merely means “man of Kerioth,” which was a village in southern Judea. This is supported by the Greek text of 6:71, where Judas’s father is actually named as “Simon Isca-riot.” Other suggested definitions tend to be rather dubious, including “false one,” “dagger man,” or “hanged one.”

Judas protested that the costly ointment lavished upon Jesus could have been sold instead, and the money given to help the poor.

“Three hundred pence” (vs. 5) represents the yearly earnings of a laborer, a significant sum even for the well-to-do.

The apostle John tells us that Judas had no real concern for the poor. He was a thief and was only concerned about the amount of money he could steal from the disciples’ treasury bag with which he was entrusted.

Defense (John 12:7-8). Defending Mary, Jesus told Judas and those with him that they should cease their reproaches. He enlightened them to the fact that what she had done was a sign that He needed to be prepared for burial.

Jesus directed His disciples’ attention to adjust their priorities in this special instance. While it is always commendable to give aid to those in need, the opportunity will always be readily available to all generations throughout history. But Jesus’ time on earth would soon be over, and there would never be another chance to make such an offering concerning His impending death and burial. Mary therefore was honored for expressing her adoration.

Jesus’ statement about the poor is an allusion to Deuteronomy 15:11, “For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, to thy needy, in thy land.” Far from commending complacency, Jesus was bringing to bear the admonition of the Torah to encourage diligence in aiding the poor, since there will never be an end to the work that needs to be done in that matter.

—John Alva Owston.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the difference between a New Testament Jewish espousal and a modern engagement?
2. How did Mary come to be with child?
3. What was Joseph considering regarding Mary?
4. Who were Mary, Martha, and Lazarus?
5. What is spikenard?
6. After she anointed Jesus’ feet with the spikenard, what further act of devotion and honor did Mary perform toward Him?
7. What are some possible meanings of the name Isca-riot?
8. What reason did Judas offer for objecting to Mary’s extravagant offering?
9. What significance did Jesus ascribe to Mary’s act of devotion?
10. How should we understand Jesus’ statement concerning the poor?

—John Alva Owston.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. The Lord may alter our plans so that He gets the glory (Matt. 1:18).
2. When faced with tough decisions, we should prayerfully consider what to do (vss. 19-21).
3. There are times when it is appropriate to serve the Lord and times when we simply enjoy His presence (John 12:1-2).
4. Our offering to the Lord should cost us something (vs. 3).
5. Though others may not understand our motives, the Lord knows our hearts (vss. 4-6).
6. We should keep our priorities straight and focus on what really matters (vss. 7-8).

—Charity G. Carter.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Joseph was described as a just man (Matt. 1:19). What does it mean to be a “just” person?
2. Why is it important to seek the Lord before making decisions (vs. 20)?
3. How would you feel if you learned that a gift you received had come at no cost to the giver (John 12:3)?
4. Why is it significant that Judas Iscariot was the one who took issue with the cost of the ointment (vss. 4-6)?
5. What did Jesus mean by saying, “The poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always” (vs. 8)?

—Charity G. Carter.

Golden Text Illuminated

“Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her” (Matthew 26:13).

The story of a woman anointing Jesus with costly ointment occurs in all four Gospels, each one offering a slightly different focus. All four Gospels, however, include one thing: criticism of Jesus and of this generous woman.

Although John notes that the allegation of wastefulness came from Judas (12:4-5), the accounts of Mark and Matthew disclose that other disciples were also saying the same thing. We could excuse their ignorance concerning the nearness of Jesus’ death, but we cannot excuse their lack of faith. Many of them had followed Jesus for years. In that time, He had turned water into wine, healed the sick, cast out demons, calmed the storm, fed the multitudes, and raised the dead.

But now some of His own disciples, witnesses to all these things, become petty over a vial of ointment. Jesus could have easily created barrels of pricy lotion or multiplied loaves and fish to feed all the poor in Israel. By criticizing Him for waste, they expose doubt in His ability to provide for His people and in His discernment in the use of resources.

Constructive criticism is sometimes necessary, but most criticism causes sorrow. Christians must not “bite and devour one another,” or they will be “consumed” by one another (Gal. 5:15).

—David Samuel Gifford.