
Day 1

Learn: Prayerfully read John 11.47-54. The Chief Priests and Pharisees gathered a council, possibly the Sanhedrin, which governed Jewish religious and legal affairs under Roman law. The Sanhedrin was dominated by the Chief Priests, who were related to the High Priest and mostly Sadducees [who doubted the resurrection of the dead at the end of time]. They all were frustrated by Jesus' success and popularity, a frustration which had reached a critical point with the amazing miracles of healing a man born blind and raising Lazarus from the dead, and teachings that Jesus was the Son of God and Messiah. Since one of the expectations of the Messiah was he would be the Ultimate Davidic King who would deliver the nation from foreign oppression, they feared that the people would proclaim Jesus as king, and then the Romans would crack down, stripping them of their political and religious authority.

According to the Jewish scriptures [our Old Testament], the High Priest should have been chosen by the Jews for a lifetime position. Under the Romans it was a political appointment, and they swapped men in and out depending on how well the High Priest kept them happy. Caiaphas [kah-ee-AH-fahs, in Greek] was appointed in AD18 and was removed in AD36. Speaking practically and politically, he noted it would be better for them [the religious leaders] that Jesus died than for the Romans to destroy the Jewish state. This also was a prophecy from God! Caiaphas understood Jesus' death as a substitutionary sacrifice, but not in the way it was! He thought of Jesus dying to save the nation from destruction by the Romans, but Jesus died to save the people from sin; and not only the Jews, but all the scattered children of God – and not just the “diaspora” of scattered Jews but all the Messiah's sheep from the Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles – so they could be gathered as one flock [as Jesus promised in John 10].

Reflect: One of the continued failures of the Jewish kings in the Old Testament was their reliance on diplomacy with Gentile nations rather than on God. These religious leaders chose to appease the Romans by killing God's Messiah [the one prophesied to deliver them from foreign rule]. The result would not be what Caiaphas expected: Rome still would destroy the Temple and remove the rights of the religious leaders a few decades later. Yet, the death of this one man [Jesus] was ultimately for the benefit of the nation of Israel and people everywhere. Can you think of any ways the church might make a similar mistake, of trying to solve its problems by appeasing the culture around it, rather than by doing what is right and trusting God with the results? What about for individual believers?

Day 2

Learn: Prayerfully read John 11.54-12.3. This is the third Passover in the gospel of John; Jesus' public ministry had been going on a little over two years. The Sanhedrin spread the word that anyone learning where Jesus was should inform them. Thus people were openly questioning whether Jesus would show for the festival. Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived in Bethany, less than two miles from Jerusalem, just on the other side of the Mount of Olives. This would have been Friday evening, the start of the Saturday Sabbath in the Jewish way of reckoning time. The meal the village prepared for him would have been Saturday evening, after the Sabbath was over.

This likely is not the same episode as in Luke 7.36-38, since the discussion that occurs after the incident involving perfume and hair is so different. Thus we should not associate Mary with the “immoral woman” in Luke. This likely is the same episode as in Matthew 26.6-13 and Mark 14.3-9, so the meal was in the house of Simon the Leper. If a small village threw a feast for a celebrity [as Jesus had become after raising Lazarus from the dead], it would not be unusual for Simon to host, Martha to serve, and Lazarus to be eating at the table. Since Jesus refers to his body being anointed, Matthew and Mark stress that Mary anointed his head [like a king], and John stresses his feet [Mary's act of humility], Mary must have poured the perfume all over Jesus, which was possible because in that time period, people ate while reclining on one side, with their heads near the table and their feet pointed away. Mary poured about eleven ounces of perfume, about a pint in liquid terms, so she anointed Jesus lavishly, which is why the whole house smelled of the stuff. The perfume was genuine Nard, a fragrant oil from the root and spike of the Nard plant of northern India, which would have been worth about a year's pay for an average laborer!

Reflect: The way John presented this scene, he emphasized Mary's humility: she sacrificed an incredibly valuable possession to worship Jesus; she humbly used her hair on his feet. She would have known the latter would make people uncomfortable, and probably could anticipate that the former would bring rebuke as wasteful. Contrast her attitude toward Jesus with that of the religious leaders, who pridefully had decided to kill Jesus. What do you think

of Mary's actions, giving up the expensive possession and humiliating herself in public just to honor Jesus? Can you think of similar things people might do today to honor Jesus? What would you be willing to give up? Are you willing to be humiliated to honor Jesus or would you protect *your* honor to the point of not being open in your worship?

Day 3

Learn: Prayerfully read John 12.3-6. Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve apostles, those closest to Jesus. John revealed that he was stealing from the ministry treasury, indicating Judas was not a good guy who struggled to accept Jesus' identity, but a man mired in sin who never really bought into the ways of God. Judas objected to Mary's sacrifice, but did not suggest she should not have sacrificed, instead he said she should have given the money to the poor rather than wasting it on Jesus. This reflects his attitude about Jesus, and his desire for that money to pass through his hands. Matthew and Mark show it was after this incident that Judas made a deal to betray Jesus.

Reflect: Matthew and Mark hint that other disciples had concerns about the extravagance of Mary's gift when there was so much suffering in their society. We know scripture calls us to give of our time, money, effort, and other resources. How much of this should go to helping those in need and how much to other ministry activities, such as evangelism and spiritual growth? Should any at all go to pure worship, and why or why not? What are some ways of investing time or money in pure worship that you think are worthwhile or not worthwhile, and why?

Day 4

Learn: Prayerfully read John 12.1-8. All the major English translations have Jesus saying [12.7], "*Leave her alone,*" but the Greek could also be translated "*You must pardon her,* that she would keep it for the day of my burial." No matter how you translate it, it can be hard to interpret, but it seems best to take it that Mary had saved the perfume to anoint Jesus as he headed to his death. This is not to say Mary necessarily understood that Jesus was about to die, she might have intended this merely as an act of humble devotion, but Jesus used this anointing to bring up the impending fact of his sacrifice. Like Caiaphas, Mary signaled more than she knew. When Jesus would die later that week, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would anoint his body similarly [19.38-42]. Jesus is not callous toward the needs of the poor, but he emphasizes, "*me* you do not always have." What Mary did was part of God the Father's plan to glorify his Son and lay the preparations for his sacrifice and resurrection.

Reflect: Over thousands of years, God gave prophecies about the coming of Christ. Even as Jesus walked the earth, God was still speaking and acting through people to arrange things the way he wanted them. Reflect on that and how it might inspire you to greater faith in who Jesus is, and in how God could intervene in your life today.

Day 5

Learn: Prayerfully read John 12.9-19. Starting in 12.12, we see events on what we call Palm Sunday. People met Jesus on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem. In this area, date palms were plentiful. The Old Testament does not associate Passover with palm branches, but the palm branch had become a national symbol of the Jewish rebellion before Jesus was born, and waving such branches now accompanied activities of important events. Waving them at Jesus might have symbolized hope that he would deliver the nation, since people had waved them when rebels retook the temple almost 200 years earlier. Hosanna is Hebrew for saying "Please save." The crowds were referring to Psalm 118.25, which says, "Please, LORD, please save us [Hosanna]" [NLT]. During the festivals, the people would sing this psalm which was seen as a Messianic prophecy. Psalm 118.26, which the people also quoted, originally might have conveyed blessings on the pilgrim coming to Jerusalem, but the official Jewish interpretation by this time treated it also as Messianic, meaning the one who comes in the name of Yahweh is the Messiah.

Reflect: While the crowds hailed him as king and Messiah, Jesus humbly entered the capital on the colt of a donkey. This fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah 9.9. "Daughter of Zion" was a common way of referring to the people of Jerusalem [centered on Mt. Zion], especially as the oppressed people of God. In this prophecy, God promised the Messiah would bring peace to the nations, deliver Jerusalem from oppression, and rule over all the earth. The people had expectations of Jesus freeing them from Rome and reestablishing God's kingdom in Israel, but Jesus came to fulfill other prophecies first [he will return to fulfill the rest]. Consider the humility the Son of God showed, coming as a helpless human baby, living with nothing but what he could carry, sacrificing everything to save us, even contrasting his identity as the King by riding a humble donkey colt. How could you be more humble, less proud?