

### Exegesis

**11:55-57** – John explains that “the Jews' passover was nigh at hand: and many went out of the country up to Jerusalem before the passover, to purify themselves.” The word “many” referred to how the city swelled from a population of about a hundred thousand inhabitants to around one million.<sup>1</sup> To say Jerusalem was bursting at the seams would be an understatement. Also, John's comment that the Jews were “to purify themselves” referred to how the Law required that people cleanse themselves from any and all ceremonial uncleanness before participating in the Passover (cf. Lev. 7:21; Num. 9:6; 2 Chron. 30:17-18).<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, a Jew could be deemed “unclean” for a variety of reasons, and, depending on the cause, they would remain in that state anywhere between one to fifty days (cf. 18:28).<sup>3</sup> Thus, because many Jews at Passover would've been from Gentile countries, their impurity would've been assumed. Non-Jews did not follow a lifestyle that sought to avoid ritualistic contaminants. For instance, Gentiles were known to bury their dead near their houses.<sup>4</sup> That a Jew living in a foreign land would've come in contact, in some way, with a person's grave would be more likely than not. In which case, their “uncleanness” would've lasted a week (cf. Num. 19:16). To ensure that they wouldn't miss the Passover, foreign Jews would need to come early. If they failed, they'd have to observe it a month later (cf. Num. 9:9-11).<sup>5</sup>

The author's mention of the Passover also has an air of gravitas and solemnity. This particular Passover would be the one where the Messiah died. Just like the many lambs slain on Israel's behalf, the Lamb of God—i.e., Jesus—would be killed on humanity's behalf (cf. 1:29, 36).<sup>6</sup> Most, if not all, of John's readership, would've been familiar with Jesus' timeline.<sup>7</sup> They would've

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<sup>1</sup> Köstenberger, Andreas J., *John*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, Leon, *The Gospel according to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Revised, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1995), p. 505.

<sup>3</sup> General Editors, “What does it mean to be ceremonially unclean?” September 12, 2022, *Got Questions*, <https://www.gotquestions.org/ceremonially-unclean.html>, [accessed, January 31, 2023].

<sup>4</sup> Köstenberger (Baker, 2008), p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, Marianne Meye, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, (Louisville, KY; Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), p. 258, “As the Lamb of God who takes away sin, Jesus is without blemish (cf. Lev. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; etc.) and has no need of cleansing: God's Holy One brings other into the realm of God's holiness.”

<sup>7</sup> Keener, Craig S., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 2:858.

counted this as the third and final Passover of Jesus' life (cf. 2:13, 6:4),<sup>8</sup> and so, upon reading these words, they would've immediately thought, "Jesus has only a week left to live."

Amongst the scores of Jews in their hurried preparations, John tells us about a common topic of conversation heard within the Temple precincts at this time: "What think ye, that he will not come to the feast?" Just as with the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus is the one everyone was talking about (cf. 7:11).<sup>9</sup> And Israelites far and wide, young and old, rich and poor, all wondered if Jesus would avoid this year's feast. Considering this question is framed in the negative ("not"), they expected the Lord would lay low and avoid the city at all costs.<sup>10</sup> They thought this because everyone knew about the Sanhedrin's intent to capture Jesus, as John explains, "Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a commandment, that, if any man knew where he were, he should shew it, that they might take him." In this, the Pharisees made it so that anyone withholding information regarding Jesus' whereabouts would be complicit. Any Jew refusing to help the Sanhedrin was, essentially, aiding and abetting a criminal. Thus, given the tense situation, the Jews wrongly assumed that Jesus would stay out of harm's way.

**12:1** – John now places a definitive timestamp on events: "Then Jesus six days before the Passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead." If it was "six days before the Passover," this means that Jesus arrived in Bethany on a Friday evening, likely before sundown when the Sabbath began.<sup>11</sup> This means the Triumphal entry will occur on a Sunday (cf. vs. 12). John's reiteration that this was the same Bethany where he had raised Lazarus from the dead might seem pointless. Why would we need such a reminder? We just read that. But recapping Lazarus' resurrection ensures this next scene is read in the light of what's come before.<sup>12</sup>

**Vs. 2-3** – Before moving on, it should be noted that an anointing of Jesus is mentioned in all four gospels (cf. Matt. 26:6-13; Mar. 14:3-9; Lu. 7:36-38). For a discussion on their similarities and differences, see the '*Additional Notes*' section for 11:55-12:50.

With the setting of the sun on Saturday,<sup>13</sup> the Evangelist describes how Mary, Martha, and Lazarus "made [Jesus] a supper," and, presumably, this was a dinner in his honor. The Lord did a miraculous work, and this family wanted to say "thank you." They probably would've done it

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<sup>8</sup> Carson, D.A., *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 424, notes that the unnamed feast of chapter 5 could've been a Passover. However, he considers this theory to be unlikely.

<sup>9</sup> Carson (1991), p. 424.

<sup>10</sup> Morris (1995), p. 506.

<sup>11</sup> Köstenberger (Baker, 2008), p. 359.

<sup>12</sup> Köstenberger (Baker, 2008), p. 359.

<sup>13</sup> Keener (2012), 2:861.

immediately after Lazarus' resurrection had Jesus not left the area due to the Sanhedrin (cf. 11:53-54). That John tells us that "Martha served" means not only that this meal likely took place at her home but that she had returned to her previous self (cf. Lu. 10:38-42). With her grief taken away, she did what she did best: minister (cf. 12:26; Lu. 12:37).<sup>14</sup> There was work to be done.

Being told that "Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him" contrasts Lazarus' previous posture when he was lying lifeless on a stone slab in his grave. Far from being wrapped in "graveclothes" (cf. 11:44) with the "stink" of death on him (cf. 11:39), Lazarus was relaxing at a celebratory banquet, enjoying life. All is as it should be.

Thus, with Martha bustling to and fro and Lazarus reclining at the table, John rounds out the trio by drawing our attention to Mary. And, as we'll see, she'll be found at Jesus' feet once again (cf. Lu. 10:39). He tells us she had "a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly...." The Greek word translated as "pound" is **λίτρα** (*litra*), and it referred to a Roman pound that would've weighed around 11.5 oz or 326 g.<sup>15</sup> This is roughly the weight of two modern-day baseballs, which may not sound like a lot, but John is talking about a high-end substance, not well water. From a monetary standpoint, to have this much spikenard would be like having a bottle of scorpion venom, "the most expensive liquid in the world" today.<sup>16</sup> Thus, considering that nard had to be processed and shipped many thousands of miles (we'll talk more about its country of origin in a moment), the price tag was immense, hence John's comment, "very costly." How expensive will be discussed later in verse 5, but suffice to say, spikenard was the status symbol of the super wealthy, not unlike designer clothes and luxury cars today. Mary emptied her bank account, or she and her family were affluent.

The term "spikenard" is a translation of the Greek word **νάρδος** (*nardos*), and it has been known by other names such as "Jatamansi," "nardinium," or, simply, "nard." It derives its name from the "nard plant" and is also called "Indian spike"<sup>17</sup> which is a reference to its country of origin. Only known to grow high up in the Himalayan mountains of northern India,<sup>18</sup> spikenard is a hearty flower with deep purple blossoms. The oil is extracted from the flower's roots, a

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<sup>14</sup> Keener (2012), 2:862, **διακονέω** is used only twice in John's account, and both times come in this chapter, 12:2, 26. The parallel between Martha's actions and Jesus' words paints serving in a positive light.

<sup>15</sup> Kruse, Colin G., *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Revised Edition, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 2017), p. 303.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, David, and Abby Tang, "Why scorpion venom is the most expensive liquid in the world," April 16, 2021, *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/scorpion-venom-most-expensive-liquid-in-the-world-2018-8>, [accessed, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022], "\$130 will get you a droplet that's smaller than a grain of sugar."

<sup>17</sup> Köstenberger (Baker, 2008), p. 360.

<sup>18</sup> Keener (2012), 2:863.

tedious process requiring many plants as only a tiny amount of spikenard oil can be collected from each flower. Nard is referenced by King Solomon, meaning it had been a part of Israeli culture for many centuries by the time of Jesus (cf. Song of Sol. 1:2).

During the first century, the use of spikenard varied from medicinal applications—i.e., a salve for skin irritations—to perfume to a masking agent used to cover up the smell of decomposition. John doesn't tell us how Mary acquired the ointment. Did she have a medical condition and, instead of using it for herself, anointed Jesus? Could it have been a family heirloom? Was it a part of some unused dowry? Considering that the Jews used spikenard in their preparations of the dead, could this have been left over from Lazarus' burial? We don't know.

The point of mentioning the spikenard is to show that anointing someone with such a costly oil was *extraordinary*. Mary used the very best. But not only that, the way in which Mary carried out the anointing made it even more remarkable for two reasons. First, John tells us she anoints the Lord's "feet," and second, she uses her own "hair" in the process.

To anoint the feet is a gesture of extreme respect and reverence. In Mary's eyes, even the part of the body that many deemed the least respectable was worthy of anointing. But because the lowest servant had to deal with feet, Mary positions herself as nothing more than a serving girl. Unlike the disciples later (cf. 13:1-20), she had no reservations about cleaning someone's feet, especially when they belonged to Jesus.

Now, regarding Mary using her own hair to work the oil into the Lord's feet, there's been some discussion on how that would've been perceived by onlookers. Some commentators suggest this act might've been a colossal breach of Jewish social convention.<sup>19</sup> They point to the fact that Jewish women kept their hair bound and that anyone who kept their hair loose would've been thought to have "loose morals."<sup>20</sup> Wright goes so far as to say that Mary's act is "roughly the equivalent...of a woman hitching up a long skirt to the top of her thighs."<sup>21</sup> However, this interpretation assumes that Mary is married. Only married women would've kept their hair bound in this manner.<sup>22</sup> Quite to the contrary, it appears that Mary and Martha were both unmarried and living with Lazarus, who was also seemingly single. There is no mention of either of them having spouses. To be clear, this in no way detracts from Mary's act. Hair is a prized possession for all women, regardless of their marital status or ethnicity. Paul even calls it

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<sup>19</sup> Morris (1995), p. 512.

<sup>20</sup> Köstenberger (Baker, 2008), p. 362.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, N.T., *John For Everyone*, Part 2, (London; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Keener (2012), 2:863.

a woman's "glory" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:15). To take something so precious and use it to wipe a man's feet defies reason and may even garner feelings of disgust. Only extreme love would compel a woman to do what Mary did. And should we see Jesus as Mary saw Jesus, we would not hesitate to do the same.

Consequently, for days after, Mary would've smelled strongly of the ointment. Rubbing it onto Jesus' feet would've transferred some of it to her hair. In fact, Mary wouldn't have been the only one to go home smelling of spikenard that day; as John tells us, "the house was filled with the odor of the ointment." Just as if one were to stand close to a fire and leave smelling of smoke, everyone in the house that day would've left with the aroma of nard on their clothes. 11.5 oz of perfume emptied all at once would've permeated every corner of the house. Moreover, John may be playing off a well-known rabbinic saying: "(The scent of) good oil is diffused from the bed-chamber to the dining-hall while a good name is diffused from one end of the world to the other."<sup>23</sup> And should Matt. 26:13 and Mar. 14:9 be a direct parallel; this would be John's way of saying, "wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."<sup>24</sup>

All told, the value of Mary's gift and act is immeasurable. What would a person have to give to ensure they would be remembered by the whole world for all time? There isn't enough gold in the universe to pay such a price.

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<sup>23</sup> Morris (1995), p. 513.

<sup>24</sup> Köstenberger (Baker, 2008), p. 362.

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 30

Text: John 11:55-12:3

We'll read about one of the most extraordinary acts of worship in all of Scripture tonight. John tells us that Mary, whose brother had just been resurrected, brings some ointment and anoints Jesus. This ointment isn't just some olive oil but precious spikenard, a substance of extraordinary value. But not only does Mary give Jesus something of extraordinary value, but she also wipes the Lord's feet with something of immeasurable worth: her hair. All told, this woman will give her all in whole-hearted worship of her Messiah.

Pastor's manuscript can be found [here](#):