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Mary's Costly Sacrifice

by Bill Lockwood

John the apostle and author of the fourth gospel relates a particularly tender scene from the last week of Jesus' life. The Lord had just arrived from travels in time for the Passover celebration (John 12:1) and, as usual, stayed in Bethany. The warm and friendly home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was his temporary retirement prior to the horrifying scenes of the final hour. John draws our attention to Mary, the humble student of Jesus who "sat at his feet and heard his word" (Luke 10:38-42). Upon this occasion, while at the "supper" prepared by these hostesses, the apostle of love vividly recalls that "Mary took a pound of ointment of *pure nard*, *very costly*, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair." And, almost as if reliving the event in his mind, John adds, "the house was filled with the odor of the ointment" (12:2). Matthew and Mark mention in their accounts that the ointment was also applied to his head (Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3. The similar scene of Luke 7 involving the "sinful woman" is *another* incident).

The "very expensive" gift of this woman is "no understatement" (G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 208). The ointment itself is called "pure nard" or "liquid nard." This was an imported unguent, extracted from the roots of scented plants and preserved in alabaster containers with narrow necks. Stored in this fashion the spikenard, or fragrant oil, improved with age and became more valuable after a number of years. Per Judas' complaint (12:5) this "alabaster cruse" of ointment could have been sold for 300 "shillings" (ASV) or "denarii." The denarius was a silver coin which "carried the laureate head of the emperor Tiberius on the obverse, with his mother, Livia, ...holding a branch and a scepter on the reverse" (*Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 1023). When it is considered that a denarius was normal pay for a day's work, Mary's gift represents about a year's wages!

Christianity involves sacrifice. Our giving of time and money may not equal the greatness of Mary's, but our dedication, like the spikenard, ought to improve with age and experience in Christ.

Another consideration comes to mind here. It involves worship. A fundamental concern for the church is not necessarily lack of competent male leadership nor the intrusion of false doctrine—though these are paramount problems that are widespread. Perhaps our chief anxiety ought to be lack of what we might call a "worshipful spirit."

The first song recorded in the Bible is found in Exodus 15. Israelites had just crossed the Red Sea. A great victory over Egypt had just been won. In a natural outpouring of emotion, the redeemed sang for joy. In many ways this is illustrative for us. Our worship also must be an overflowing of gratitude and adoration. Such was Mary's example; an expression of love.