

THE GOSPEL OF THE ALABASTER JAR



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A Life Poured Out

There is an amazing act recorded in the New Testament of a woman pouring expensive perfume onto the Lord Jesus. The event is described in all of the four Gospels - Luke 7:37-38, John 12:1-8; Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:1-9. There have been different opinions as to who the women were. Some believe that each of the Gospel writers was describing the same act by the same woman at the same time. Some even name Mary Magdalene but there is no proof of this in the Word. Others believe it is the account of two different women - Luke and John describing the same one; Matthew and Mark describing a different person. However, with careful study, it becomes obvious that they were three different women in three different places at three different times and with three different purposes. Understanding this is very important because each act has great significance, not only to the woman involved, but to each one of us who are believers in Christ.

Both the alabaster jar and the expensive perfume had great meaning for each of these women. They were of great value to them not just because of their worth but because of what they represented. In the alabaster jar was their future. The perfume would be the dowry for their marriage. In other words, in pouring it out on the Lord each one was pouring out her life.

As we look at each of these women we see there was a specific purpose in their act and the wonder of what they were doing holds a vital truth for us, as believers today, to take hold of personally.



The Sinful Woman

*“A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them”
Luke 7:37-38 (read through verses 36-50).*

This occurred early in the ministry of Jesus. Verse 11 tells us it was in the town of Nain and verse 36 says it was in a Pharisee’s house. The Pharisees prided themselves in their knowledge of the Law (read Matthew 23:1-33) so the host would have been horrified at this sinful woman entering his home and, to him, proved Jesus had not come from God.

“When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.’” Luke 7:39.

Read Jesus' response to Simon, the Pharisee, in verses 40-46. The Pharisee, had shown no respect for Jesus when he had entered the house. He had not put oil on his head, washed his feet or greeted him with a kiss, as the custom was for honoured guests.

“Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little’” verses 44-50.

The fact that the woman dared to enter the house of a Pharisee reveals three important facts about her. Far more important to her than the scrutiny and judgmental attitude she knew would come from the Pharisee, she risked everything to get to Jesus. She knew who he was and was desperate for forgiveness.

The Gospel of Salvation

The sinful woman expressed three qualities of her heart...

Repentance

In kneeling in the lowest position at the feet of Jesus - with much weeping and wiping his feet with her hair - she was expressing her *unworthiness* and *genuine sorry* for her sin.

Faith

She comes to Jesus for the answer to her great need of forgiveness - expressing her knowledge of *who Jesus is* and that, as the Son of God, he can forgive her sins.

Love

Pouring out the perfume on his feet represented the giving of her *whole life to him* as Lord. In return she received three things from the Lord...

“Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ ... ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’” Luke 7:48,50.

Forgiveness

God's forgiveness is total and final. Her sins are wiped away.

Salvation

She is saved to live a righteous life both on earth and for eternity.

Peace

She now has peace with God and peace within her heart.

The act of the sinful woman in the Gospel of Luke is a wonderful picture of salvation, revealing the first steps of a believer coming into a whole new life through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a picture of salvation for every person and every generation.

“ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.* 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NKJV) ”

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Mary of Bethany

The family of Lazarus was well known to the Lord Jesus. The Scripture records him visiting them three times. Every time he came, Mary, Lazarus' sister, is found at the feet of Jesus. Her experience at his feet pictures the growing experience of each one of us who are believers in Christ.

Learning

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’ ‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’” Luke 10:38-42.

On his first visit, the Lord is teaching the family and others who would have gathered. It was quite customary at that time for disciples to sit at the feet of their rabbi. In Acts 22:3 Paul says he was instructed at the feet of Gamaliel, a leading rabbi of Jerusalem. However, this custom did not apply to women. Mary's initiative in taking such a position at Jesus' feet would have shocked most Jewish men. Rabbis did not have female disciples. Girls were not allowed to receive a formal education. Mary, as a believer in the Lord, breaks the custom and eagerly sits at Jesus' feet to learn. Martha is busy preparing the food but Mary was hungry for a different kind of food - the Word of the Lord. This, said Jesus, is the priority and just as it was for Mary so it is for us today.

“...as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” 1 Peter 2:2 NJKV (see also Colossians 1: 24-27; Hebrews 4:12).

Experiencing

Read John 11:1-44. The second visit of Jesus to their home is in very tragic circumstances. Despite Martha and Mary sending a message to the Lord that Lazarus was seriously ill, the Lord had waited 4 days until he knew Lazarus was dead before coming to them. This was to be a great trial of their faith. When the news comes that the Lord has arrived Martha goes out to meet him but Mary does not. We can only imagine what was going through Mary's mind. A big question must have been why the Lord did not come when he knew how ill Lazarus was. Finally, Martha comes back, calls her sister aside and tells her that Jesus is asking for her.

“When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him....When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died’” John 11:28,32.

In the midst of the greatest trial of her life and of her faith, Mary falls at the feet of Jesus. She pours out the grief of her heart to the only one who has the answer. Jesus had declared to Martha that he is *“the resurrection and the life”* (John 11:25-27) and Mary was about to experience the power of the Word that she loved to sit and learn - the reality that Jesus Is the *Living Word* (John 1:1).

“When Jesus saw her weeping...he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled... Jesus wept...once more deeply moved, came to the tomb...Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’...Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said
..... ***verses 29-44.***

Like Mary, as believers in Christ we have stepped into the “miracle zone” and opportunities to “see the glory of God” at work in our lives. The things we experience throughout our life including the trials of faith we face at times, are vital ingredients for our growth in Christ (see 1 Peter 1:3-7). God has a goal in mind for us - ***“the full measure of the stature of Christ”*** (Ephesians 4:13) - and He is working in everything that happens to us - good and bad - to bring that goal to pass.

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” Romans 8:28-29 NKJV.

It now comes to the final time Mary is at the feet of Jesus. Six days before the Lord goes to the Cross he visits Lazarus’s home for the third time where a dinner was held in Jesus’ honour. Lazarus, alive and well and the evidence of God’s glory and power, is reclining at the table with the disciples and guests (John 12:1-2).

Worshipping

“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” John 12:3.

This time the Scripture specifically describes the house being filled with the fragrance. This is the purpose of the pouring out of our life to the Lord...that all who surround us may be aware of the Lord - his glory and his power - through our love and service of him.

“For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” 2 Corinthians 2:15.

Pouring out the perfume on Jesus’ feet was an act of total worship by Mary. From all that she had *learned* sitting at his feet and all that she had *experienced* of his glory in her life, she poured out her life in total *worship* to him. Paul, after writing of the wonder of all the Lord has done for us, describes in Romans 12:1 this full expression of true worship, and Jesus describes true worship in John 4:23-24. Worship is more than singing and lifting up our hands, although these are good ways to express our heart. Worship is the offering of our whole life. Jesus’ response to Judas’ complaint at “wasting” the perfume (John 12:4-6) is very enlightening...

“‘Leave her alone,’ Jesus replied. ‘It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial...’” John 12:7.

Mary’s act of worship was in light of who Jesus is, all he had done in her life, and what he was about to do on the Cross for the salvation of the world.



The Unnamed Woman

Just four days after Mary had poured the perfume on Jesus' feet (2 days before the Cross) the Lord, still in Bethany, is invited to dine at Simon the Leper's house (Matthew 26:1-13; Mark 14:1-9). Obviously Simon would no longer be a leper as no other guests would have come. We can assume he had been healed by Jesus.

“While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head”
Mark 14:3.

Here, again, is a woman pouring expensive perfume on the Lord. As had happened in the two other instances, the disciples are indignant. It was the waste of the equivalent of a year's wage and, in their thinking, it could have been given to the poor, and they “rebuked her harshly”. But Jesus said...

“Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me... When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial...” Matthew 26:10-13.

Mary's act had also included being for the day of the Lord's burial (John 12:7) but it's expression was a very personal one of her love and worship of the Lord. This woman's act, however, had even greater significance in relation to the Lord himself - *“She has done a beautiful thing to me”*. Although it would have been very much an act of love for the Lord by her pouring out her most precious possession, it was also a prophetic act. She poured the perfume, not on his feet, but *on his head*. It would then have poured down onto his whole body. It was an act of *anointing*.

Anointed

At the beginning of his ministry, quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2, the Lord Jesus had declared...

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” Then he rolled up the scroll...and began by saying to them, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”* Luke 4:18-21.

He had fulfilled the work in his life on earth the Father had sent him to do (see John 17:1-5). Now, in two days, the time had come for him to fulfil the greatest task of all. He was to die, taking the sin and judgment of all sinful mankind on himself, to set them free and bring them into relationship with his Father again.

The unnamed woman's action of anointing the Lord Jesus was a declaration of who he is and what he had come to do. The three specific categories of people in the Old Testament who were especially anointed prepictured the reality of who the Jesus is.

The Revelation of His Glory

* **The King** - see 1 Samuel 10:1; 2 Samuel 16:13

Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords! (Revelation 17:14; Revelation 1:5). The Lord Jesus was not only the natural heir to the throne of David, which the genealogies

reveal, he was far more. He is the Son of God. He is seated at the right hand of the Father; He is the King of all kings.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” Colossians 1:15-17.

* **The Prophet** - see Deuteronomy 18:18; John 6:14.

A prophet is one who speaks forth the word of God to the people. The Lord Jesus came as the great true Prophet, representing his Father God. He was the Word become flesh! The great Communicator of the heart of God to mankind.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:1,14.

He spoke only what he heard the Father saying and did only what he saw the Father doing.

“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working...I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does...By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” John 5:17,19,30.

* **The High Priest** - see Leviticus 8:10; Psalm 133:2.

In pouring the pure nard on the Lord's head, the unnamed woman was making a declaration: Jesus is the High Priest of our salvation! (see Hebrews 4:14).

“...because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need -- one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted about the heavens” Hebrews 7:24-26 (Hebrews 9:11-14).

Once a year, under the Old Covenant, on behalf of the whole nation of Israel, the High Priest would take the shed blood of a young bull and goat into the Holiest of All where the fulness of God's glory was manifest (Leviticus 16:14-16). As the perfect High Priest, by the shedding of his own blood on our behalf, the Lord Jesus brought us into the full glory of the presence of God. The moment he died the thick curtain in the temple, which separated sinful people from God's presence and glory, was torn from top to bottom. “The veil” was taken away! Heaven was open!

“...to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away....whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” 2 Corinthians 3:14-16.

The Gospel of the Alabaster Jar

In response to the anointing on his head by this unnamed woman, the Lord Jesus makes a wonderful statement in which every generation and every one of us is included...

“I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” Matthew 26:13.

The anointing of the Lord by the third woman is the capstone of first two. Combined together they picture our full and growing experience in Christ and the ultimate fulfilment of God’s glorious plan. Their lives are a prophetic statement for all of us.

The Sinful Woman

The pouring out of her life expressed in the alabaster jar of perfume, pictures our salvation, forgiveness and new life (which is completed by the gift of the Holy Spirit - John 20:22).

“...Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again....no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’” John 3:3,5-7 (John 1:12).

Mary of Bethany

Mary’s total love and worship because of all she had experienced of the Lord, pictures our growth in our relationship with the Lord and with the Father through the revelation of the Word and His miraculous workings in our life. This has the response in our total worship of Him.

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NKJV).

The Unnamed Woman

The woman’s revelation of who the Lord Jesus is and all he was about to do on the Cross is the foundation of our faith but also a continuous revelation that constantly, by the work of the Holy Spirit, transforms us into His image (read Ephesians 1:16-21).

“... I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” Ephesians 1:16-19 (read through to verse 21).

Our Glorious Future

“To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forever more! Amen” Jude 24-25.

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