

FOR HIS BURIAL

“She did it to prepare me for burial” (Matt. 26:12).

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

Matthew, Mark, and John all tell the story of a woman anointing Jesus in Bethany a short while before He died (Matt. 26:6 – 13; Mk. 14:1 – 9; Jn. 12:1 – 8). Jesus said they did it for his burial. Luke also tells of a woman anointing Jesus but this happened in Galilee much earlier (Lk. 7:36 – 50).

The problem with what happened in Bethany involves an apparent contradiction. John said it happened 6 days before the Passover (Jn. 12:1) but Mark said it happened 2 days before (Mk. 14:1). The problem disappears, however, if you accept that Jesus was anointed two times. First He was anointed 6 days before the Passover, and the second time 4 days later. John describes the first instance, and Matthew and Mark describe the second.

The confusion arises because of some notable similarities. Both happened in Bethany. Both were done by a woman. Both involved the same amount of perfume valued at the same price. Jesus also defended both women and observed that both anointed Him for His burial.

The differences, however, are significant. They happened at different times with 4 days in between. They happened at different places. The first at the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Jn. 12:1, 2), and the second at the home of Simon the Leper (Matt. 26:6; Mk. 14:3). The anointing was apparently done by different women. The first was done by Mary (Jn. 12:3) and the second by someone else only designated as “a woman” (Matt. 26:7; Mk. 14:3). Note also that Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, and the “woman” anointed His head. Matthew and Mark record that Jesus wanted what the “woman” did to be told throughout the whole earth (Matt. 26:13; Mk. 14:9). He did not say this, however, about Mary. There is also a difference about the source of the criticism. John wrote that Judas criticized Mary for such waste (Jn. 12:3), but Matthew said it was the “disciples” who criticized the “woman” (Matt. 26:8) and Mark said it was “some of those present” (Mk. 14:4).

The fact that two similar events should happen to emphasize the death and burial of Jesus is not a problem. In fact it seems quite appropriate for the Bible requires two witnesses to establish something as a fact. The fact that the same amount of perfume was used with the same value is also easily explained. The KJV said it was a “pound” while the NIV said it was a “pint” (Jn. 12:3). Mark confirms that the perfume used by the “woman” was also of equal value (Mk. 14:5). We should not be surprised that merchants market their products using a common measure. Hence we can buy a “pound” of butter, or a “pound” of honey, or a “pound” of coffee, etc. It would be reasonable therefore for both Mary and the “woman” to buy a “pound” or “pint” of the same perfume for the same price.

Let us not lose sight, however, of the significance of this anointing. It was for His burial! Six months before at Caesarea Philippi Jesus began to clearly tell His disciples that He had to be killed in Jerusalem and raised on the third day (Matt. 16:21). Six days later He conferred with Moses and Elijah about His death that would take place in Jerusalem (Lk. 9:31). Jesus repeated the same truth as He led His disciples to Jerusalem (Matt. 20:17 – 19). Luke records the same thing and adds: **“The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about” Lk. 18:34).**

When Jesus arrived at Bethany, less than a week before Calvary, the disciples were still in denial about what Jesus was clearly saying, Mary, however, understood what they didn’t. Overcome with grief she took the expensive perfume which might well have represented her life’s savings. Impulsively she poured it on His “feet” and wiped them with her hair.

Four days later the same thing happened at the home of Simon the Leper. This time, however, an unnamed woman poured her perfume on the “head” of Jesus as He was reclining at the table. How sad that no one but these women understand that soon by one sacrifice Jesus would atone for all sins for all time (Heb. 10:i9 – 14). These women saw what the disciples’s didn’t. Do you?