

JESUS ENCOUNTERS | Mary of Bethany

Keegan Kalideen, August 28th, 2022

Let's pray together.

Lord as we open Your Word,
tune our hearts and our minds to hear your voice,
Clear away all the distractions and give us a single-minded focus on You.
We ask that your Holy Spirit would stir in us a fresh affection for Your glory.
We open up our hearts to you now,
that you might expose and extinguish our sinful desires,
And give us instead a renewed passion to know You more.
By your grace, Help us to bring everything we have, and all that we are,
And surrender it all at your feet.
Reveal yourself to us,
That we might see a glimpse of your glory,
And grasp something of your infinite worth.
In these next few moments together,
Jesus, I pray that you would personally encounter each heart.
Awaken those who are sleeping,
Rekindle those who are dormant,
Fill those who are hungry for Your Word,
Satisfy those who are thirsty for your presence,
And may the fragrance of our worship rise and be pleasing to you.
Amen.

If you have your Bibles or devices, please turn with me to the Gospel of John, chapter 12.

We've been in a series in the Gospel of John, looking at individuals whose lives were restored and transformed by encountering Jesus. We've looked at Nicodemus, the woman caught in adultery, the Samaritan woman at the well, and today we'll be looking at Mary of Bethany. But as I began to study, I realized that her encounters with Jesus mirrored many of my own experiences. And the deeper I journeyed into Mary's life, the more convicted I was about my own heart. This text stirred in me this week a fresh encounter with Jesus that was much needed and long overdue.
I pray the same happens for you.

There are three scenes in the New Testament in which we find this specific Mary as a crucial character at the heart of the narrative. And **in the brief portraits of her encounters with Jesus, Mary exemplifies the anatomy of a worshiper: a single-minded, wholehearted, unqualified devotion to pleasing Jesus.**

Her story demonstrates what it looks like when we strive, with what we have, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might.

Today we'll explore these three portraits of Mary's life in order to piece together a complete picture of her passionate devotion.

As we explore this Jesus encounter, I want you to consider how Mary's story might serve as a gateway for you to personally encounter Jesus, right here, right now.

Let's read this together:

The Gospel of John chapter 12, verses 1–8. Hear the Word of the Lord:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

This is the third and final scene where we find Mary of Bethany in the Gospels. But in order to fully appreciate the force of Mary's actions here, we have to backtrack a bit to her first two encounters with Jesus. So keep your finger on John 12, while we go back in time to an earlier moment in Jesus' ministry, when He first met Mary.

In Luke 10, verses 38-42, we are first introduced to Mary and her sister Martha. Luke sets our first impression of Mary by noting that she "sat at Jesus' feet and listened to His teaching". Meanwhile, her sister Martha was "distracted with much serving", and even became annoyed that her sister was just sitting there while she was doing all the work. So she complained to Jesus. To which Jesus responded: "Martha, Martha...you are

anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”

In this first portrait, we find Mary, sitting at Jesus’ feet, quietly listening to His teaching. Martha, on the other hand, was distracted with much serving, anxious and troubled about many things, annoyed with her sister and complaining to Jesus.

Who do you most relate to in this first scene? Mary or Martha?

When last did you set aside time to just sit at the feet of Jesus? Just to be with Him?

When was the last time you opened His Word, patiently waiting to hear His voice?

Do you spend time getting to know the Lord?

Or have you just been busy working *for* Him?

It’s no coincidence that earlier on in the same chapter, we find Jesus thanking His Father for hiding these things from the wise and understanding, but graciously revealing them to little children. “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!” He said to His disciples. “For many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”

Mary, sitting like a little child at the feet of Jesus, heard the voice of her Shepherd and was satisfied with a portion of His presence that would never be taken from her. This initial encounter with Jesus would function as a seed that would eventually blossom into a tree of devotion, nourished by streams of incessant worship.

And this is our first portrait in the anatomy of a worshiper: **Single-minded Attention.**

Mary’s eyes were fixed upon Jesus, as she sat at His feet, listening with single-minded attention.

Jesus is relentlessly speaking; are you listening?

The next scene where we find this specific Mary in Jesus’ ministry is in John chapter 11.

Her brother Lazarus was terminally ill, so Mary and her sister Martha sent word to Jesus that his dear friend Lazarus was dying. But instead of racing to save his friend’s life, or even speak a healing word from where He was as he had done before, Jesus consciously lets Lazarus die. So Mary & Martha were devastated.

Not only had they lost their brother, but the Lord they had so much faith in - their friend and teacher, the long-awaited Messiah and King of Israel - Jesus, had stood them up and let them down. At least that’s how they felt.

Many friends and family had come to comfort them as they grieved their brother, but when Martha heard that Jesus was coming she went out to meet him.

Mary, however, remained seated in the house. She was upset.

Martha, once distracted and anxious, was now full of faith and expectation in Jesus. So she runs back and tells her sister, "Mary, the Teacher is here and is calling for you." And while Mary was probably still overcome with emotions, John tells us that "she rose quickly and went to him". No matter what she was feeling in the moment, she was nonetheless swift to respond as soon she heard Jesus' calling her.

So Mary followed her sister to where Jesus was, and when she saw him, she fell at his feet and wept profusely, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary's words seem at first glance like a complaint against Jesus, similar to that of her sister's in the previous scene. But notice her posture when she encounters Jesus, a posture that becomes Mary's trademark whenever we find her in Jesus' presence. We first found her *sitting* at Jesus' feet, listening to His teaching. Now, we find her overcome with grief and confusion. Yet despite her storm of emotions, Mary humbly casts herself at Jesus' feet, and begins to pour out her soul before Him with the utmost honesty and vulnerability. Her tears are mixed with both overwhelming sorrow *and* wholehearted surrender to Jesus no matter the circumstance. To the point where everyone else in this scene begins to weep at the tomb of Lazarus.

And in John chapter 11 verse 35, we find the shortest but perhaps the most emotionally evocative verse in all of Scripture. Deeply moved and greatly troubled by Mary's full yet broken heart over her brother, John tells us that "**Jesus wept.**" (**John 11:35**)

It has been said that "If your prayers don't move you, they won't move God."

When was the last time you poured out your soul before the Lord?

Do you weep to Him?

Have you ever fallen on your face in desperation and grief before God?

Do you laugh with Him? Or dance with joy before Him?

How much have you emotionally invested into God's presence?

Are you willing to let Him in, and to align your feelings and desires with His?

If nothing else, this scene proves that if you truly want to be like Jesus, in the full range of his humanity, then emotions are not just normal...they're necessary.

'Cause even Jesus wept. And he invites us to be our authentic selves in His presence.

And this is our second portrait in the anatomy of a worshiper: **Whole-hearted affection.**

Mary's emotions deeply moved Jesus, as she fell at His feet, pouring out her soul to Him in whole-hearted affection.

Jesus is deeply moved by our sincere emotions.

And when we pour out our soul before the Lord, releasing our inmost affections toward Him, we position our hearts to receive His loving affection towards us.

And Mary's tears of sorrow soon turned to tears of joy as Jesus then proceeded to resurrect her brother from death, proving that He had a better plan all along.

So as we've journeyed through Mary's story so far, we've found her *sitting* at Jesus' feet in single-minded attention, we watched her *fall* at Jesus' feet with whole-hearted affection, and now the stage is set for her third and final portrait in John chapter 12. The chapter opens with a dinner being held for Jesus in celebration of Lazarus' resurrection. Martha is serving, and Lazarus is at the table with Jesus. This would have likely been a banquet with many others invited. And at these special feasts, the guests would "recline at the table" as it says in verse 2. Now picture this. What this actually means, is that in order to fit more people in the home, they would set the food on a low table, and the guests would be lying down on the ground with their heads near the table and their feet away from it, resting on one elbow while eating with the other hand.

Into this scene, perhaps in the middle of the meal and conversations, Mary quietly enters with a jar containing half a liter of pure nard, a fragrant oil extract that was imported by the Romans from northern India. This would have been incredibly rare and unbelievably expensive. Many commentators wonder if Mary inherited this as a family heirloom, a valuable treasure that had been accumulated and passed down over multiple generations. We find out in verse 5 that if it were sold, it would be worth 300 denarii, which was approximately an entire year's wages.

Now just for reference, the median household income in Markham is apparently \$90,000 per year. Now assuming that this is somewhat reflective of our congregation's income, imagine walking into a dinner party carrying a bottle containing \$90,000 worth of perfume.

Some of the Young Adults are like, "That's a car, tuition, AND a wedding!"

Yeah.

So Mary walks into the room, carrying her jar of fragrant oil, probably worth the price of a decent car, 4 years of university, and a nice wedding. Let that sink in for a moment.

Then, as we should expect by now, she assumes her trademark posture: at Jesus' feet.

Except this time, we don't find her attentively sitting or emotionally falling to the ground.

This time, Mary approaches Jesus while he's lying down, reclined at the table,

and in a calculated act of reverent worship, she humbly *kneels* at Jesus' feet and begins to pour out her expensive gift of oil upon him.

This story is also featured in the Gospels of both Matthew & Mark, who mention that she also anointed Jesus' head, which was an act done during the coronation ceremony of kings. It's clear from our portraits thus far, that from her first encounter with Jesus to her last, Mary was keenly aware that she was in the presence of eternal majesty. It's no coincidence that we consistently find her prostrate before Jesus, first in single-minded attention, then in whole-hearted affection, and now in her lavish outpouring of unqualified devotion. Mary was in the presence of her King.

John instead emphasizes her anointing of Jesus' feet, a gesture of humble servanthood to her Lord, but also an anticipation of the following chapter, in John 13, when Jesus Himself would wash His disciples' feet. I almost wonder if Mary's act so deeply moved Jesus, like when she wept, that it inspired Him to reenact this scene as an example for His followers. Or perhaps, her heart was so full of the Holy Spirit that she was led to perform this costly foot-washing ceremony as a preview of what would follow. But Mary's act wasn't just a prophetic anticipation of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, it anticipated something much more important. In fact, this entire section of John's Gospel is a narrative transition that triggers the events that unfold throughout the rest of the book. So chapter 12 verse 1 opens with five words that signal the dismal descent into Jesus' final week leading to His death. "Six days before the Passover". The Passover was the Jewish celebration in which a lamb was sacrificed to commemorate their deliverance from Egyptian slavery, specifically recalling the night that the Lord brought judgment upon their oppressors but "passed over" the Jews that marked their doors with the blood of a lamb. So from the outset of the chapter, John is subtly hinting at something here. Then in verse 5, when Judas gets upset at Mary for wasting this expensive ointment, Jesus tells him to "Leave her alone, for she has kept it for the day of my burial." It's evident that Mary always grasps something that others around her continually miss. In the first scene, when her sister accused her of being lazy, Jesus said she had actually "chosen the good portion, and that it would not be taken away from her". And now, when Judas accuses her of being wasteful, Jesus regards it as an appropriate offering.

But something else is missing here. Why does Jesus say that "she has kept it for the day of His burial"? How does this scene with Mary have ANYTHING to do with His burial? Well, when John began this section by noting that this took place "six days before the Passover", he was making a direct connection between Mary's anointing of Jesus and the events that would take place a week later. In the coming days, Jesus would be arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. Six days from this dinner scene, he would be crucified as the eternal Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world. And before the sun rose the next

morning, he would be buried in a tomb, bound in linen cloth, surrounded by a mixture of fragrant spices. That's right. The ancient burial process always incorporated an extravagant array of aromatic oils and spices because of the putrid stench of a corpse as it decayed over time. In fact, in the previous chapter, when Jesus commanded them to remove the stone from Lazarus' grave, Martha warned against it, reminding him that Lazarus had been dead for four days, and by this time there would be a rancid odor. This may have appeared like a completely random and wasteful act to the others in the room, but *Jesus* recognized that Mary was consciously conducting the most precious and personal burial ceremony for her Lord, a week in advance. She was so transfixed by this heavenly vision of her King, that Mary's worship was way ahead of her time.

She would have also been familiar with the story of the sinful woman earlier on in Jesus' ministry, in Luke chapter 7, who made a spectacle by entering a Pharisees' house, weeping at Jesus' feet, wiping her tears with her hair, and anointing his feet with ointment from an alabaster jar. Jesus' words to this despised woman must have burned in Mary's mind: **"Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."** (Luke 7:48,50 ESV)

So Mary knew very well what she was doing when, in her last moments with her Lord, she had one final parting gift that she had kept for His burial. So as she emptied her costly inheritance on Jesus, and the house was filled with the fragrance of her expensive perfume, she embraced her Savior whose permeating fragrance of sacrificial love would soon overcome the fatal stench of her sin. She was willing, in a single moment, to spend the full value of her most prized earthly possession at the feet of Jesus, for there was no sufficient price tag for her salvation, and the costly measure of her lavish worship paled in comparison to the infinite cost of her forgiveness on the cross.

Have you been forgiven?

Have you experienced the lavish gift of God's grace upon your life?

Has the putrid stench of your sin been eradicated by the fragrant aroma of the Lamb of God who was slain?

Have you been buried with Christ, your guilt washed away in the sea of His love?

Romans 6:3–4 says this:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried, therefore, with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4 ESV)

From her very first encounter with Jesus, Mary had experienced an early aroma of new life in Christ before others even caught wind of it. It's almost as if, because of her passionate desire for Jesus, Mary got an advanced screening of the Gospel, and wasted no time taking full advantage of every moment she had with Jesus. Everytime she breathed in the refreshing scent of His presence, it renewed her mind and transformed her heart. Her attentive listening and her affectionate surrender were both outward signs that Mary had caught a glimpse of God's glory whenever she encountered Jesus. She cherished His voice as He spoke to her. She witnessed His power when He raised her brother from the dead, turning her tears of sorrow into tears of joy. And now, she had proven that she was willing to give everything she had and lay down her life in worship. Mary was all-in.

And this brings us to our third portrait in the anatomy of a worshiper:

Unqualified Devotion. Mary's actions proved that she was willing to go all-in for Jesus, kneeling at his feet in unqualified devotion.

Do you desire to love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might? Mary's life provides three vivid portraits of what true worship looks like in action. As we review, let's take some time to recommit our minds, our hearts, our lives to Jesus. You can bow your head and close your eyes if you'd like.

Portrait #1: Mary's eyes were fixed upon Jesus, as she sat at His feet, listening with single-minded attention.

What distractions are preventing you from focusing on God?

Is there spiritual noise in your life that you need to silence or tune out?

Maybe you're struggling to hear or understand God's voice for yourself.

Perhaps there's a specific place that you need to go this week to hear God clearly.

Or maybe the company you keep around you tends to lead you away from God.

Or maybe you need to cancel some plans or appointments this week to make time for Jesus.

Take a moment to ask God to still your heart, and quiet your soul, in order that you might hear His voice clearly and be satisfied with an abundant portion of His presence.

Portrait #2: Whole-hearted affection. Mary's emotions deeply moved Jesus, as she fell at His feet, pouring out her soul to Him in whole-hearted affection.

Do you desire God more than anything or anyone else?

Do you hunger for His will above all else?

Does God have full access to your whole heart?

Take a moment to ask God to soften your hardened heart, and fill it with a burning affection and a desperate longing for Him. That you would feel what He feels, and desire what He desires. Open your heart and receive His loving affection toward you today.

Portrait #3: Mary's actions proved that she was willing to go all-in for Jesus, kneeling at his feet in unqualified devotion.

In 2 Samuel 24, King David said,

"I cannot not give to the Lord something that costs me nothing!"

How costly is your worship?

Are there areas of your life that you've been withholding from God?

Are you willing to surrender all that you have and all that you are to follow Him?

Maybe that's simply lifting your hands while you sing.

Or getting back to a consistent habit of tithing.

Maybe it's leading your home in regular times of family worship.

Or maybe you've been worshiping online, and it's time to come back in-person.

Whatever costly worship looks like for you, take a moment now to lift up all that you hold dear in this life, your possessions, your identity, your relationships, your time.

Surrender all of it to God, remembering the heavy price that Jesus paid for your salvation, and the infinite cost of your forgiveness.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.

Jesus, you are worthy of it all.

May our prayer and our praise rise to you as a sweet fragrance of our devotion.

BENEDICTION

May our minds be ever fixed upon Jesus,

And may our hearts be filled with renewed affection for Him day by day,

As we pour out our lives in a fragrant offering of worship for His glory.

Amen.