

Jesus Came to Bethany, Where Lazarus Lived, Whom Jesus Had Raised From the Dead

John 11:55 to 12:1 and 9-11

DIG: What was *the mikvah*? Why was it necessary? What were its stipulations? Why is baptism a stumbling block for many messianic Jews to put their faith in Yeshua as the Messiah? How is *the mikvah* like a rebirth? Why did Jesus go to Bethany? Why were the common people looking for Christ? Why was the presence of Lazarus particularly embarrassing to the Sadducees? What was their plan?

REFLECT: How do Messiah's words and actions in this passage comfort you? How has God helped you during a sad or disappointing time? How can you share the pain of others who suffer? How can I surrender past hurts and disappointments to ADONAI?

When it was almost time for Pesach, many Jewish pilgrims went up from the surrounding country to the Holy City of Yerushalayim for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover (John 11:55). This is the fourth of four Passovers mentioned in the ministry of Christ. The first is mentioned in John 2:13. The second is in John 5:1, while the third is referred to in John 6:4, and the fourth in John 11:55, here in 12:1, and also in 13:1, 18:28 and 39, and 19:14. By dating these, we are able to conclude that this was the fourth Passover in the three and a half years of Christ's ministry.¹²³⁷

The purification process was vital for them to properly celebrate the Passover. It created a physical and emotional state of mind that prepared them to embrace the holiness of ADONAI. So most arrived in the Holy City almost a week before the holy day. Both men and women would immerse in *the mikvah*, a bath taken for ritual purification purposes, then the men would refrain from having sex with their wives until after the Passover, believing the act of ejaculation makes the body impure. Similarly, menstruating women would be unable to immerse in *the mikvah* and would also be forbidden from entering the Temple grounds. Touching a dead body or even having their shadow reach a dead body also rendered a person impure and unable to celebrate the Passover.

Most of us messianic Jews have had to overcome many barriers to arrive at our personal faith in Yeshua as the Messiah. One such example was probably the perception of baptism, which often has been considered a sign of a Jew's "conversion" to the church world. Even the Greek term sounds so foreign to the Jewish ear. Yet, like so many New Testament

customs, baptism is thoroughly Jewish in its roots. The term "baptidzo" is a direct translation of the Hebrew term "*tevilah*" meaning "to dip or immerse." In this original context we can understand that there are many different types of immersions in traditional Judaism. These immersions have normally taken place in the special pool called *the mikveh* meaning *a collection of waters*.

According to rabbinic tradition, a kosher *mikveh* must contain enough water for full bodily immersion (about 120 gallons) and this water must be "living waters"; that is, fresh water that comes from a natural source and not piped. There is considerable debate about what percentage of the *mikveh* must contain the living waters. Many authorities agree that a swimming pool is an acceptable *mikveh* when there is no other specially designated place. Likewise, a river or ocean can serve as a natural place for such immersion. In the Torah, there were various occasions that called for a *mikveh* ceremony such as when there were healings, a childbirth or preparation for priestly service (**Leviticus 12-16**). In the laws of family purity, a married woman must go through a sexual separation (*Nidah*) during her monthly period until the time where she takes a *mikveh* to symbolize her ritual cleansing (**Leviticus 15:19-24**). **The rabbis teach that another case for *mikveh* is for a Gentile convert to symbolize their true repentance.** Of course, many of the biblical cases cannot apply to modern society as there is no functioning Temple or priesthood. Still, the tradition of *mikveh* is followed in religious communities for the purposes of *Nidah*, Gentile conversion and to some extent to prepare for the holy days.¹²³⁸

Despite all of these external details, one should not miss the spiritual picture which *mikveh* illustrates. As one modern Jewish commentator put it, "One interpretation of the *mikveh* relates it to an experience of death and resurrection, and also to the re-entry into the womb and reemergence. Immersing fully, you are like the fetus in the womb, and when you come up out of the *mikveh* you are as reborn" (Yitzak Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, p.569).

So even before the pilgrims saw **Yerushalayim**, they were mentally preparing for the week to come. Anticipating the aroma of roast lamb that will hang over **the City** as **the Passover** feasts are being cooked, the pilgrims count their money, worrying about how they will pay for the feast and the inevitable taxes they will have to pay in **Jerusalem**. Despite their sore feet and aching legs from walking long distances through the wilderness, the travelers would be transformed by the magnetic pull of **the Heavenly City**. Their thoughts were no longer set on their farms back home and the barley crop that needed to be harvested immediately on their return, but on holiness and purity. Soon they would ascend the hill known as the Mount of Olives and look down upon the heart-stopping sight of **the City of David** in all its glory. **The Temple** would gleam white and gold, and the mighty walls of **the Temple Mount**

would be amazing. The utter splendor of the **House of God** would remind them that they had arrived at the center of Jewish life.¹²³⁹

They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the Temple courts they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't He coming to the festival at all?" In other words, "Since He knows the Sanhedrin seeks His death, will He disobey the Torah and not show up in order to save His skin? The Sadducees and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest Him (John 11:56-57). His official rejection had been filtering down to the masses and those who would be asking for His death would be steadily growing during the week.

After arriving from Jericho six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany and spent the Sabbath there quietly preparing for the dramatic week to come (see **Ix - The Examination of the Lamb**). Bethany was where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead (Yochanan 12:1). Jerusalem was a short two-mile walk from the village of Bethany. They stayed at the home of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. It would be their base throughout the Passover week, and where Yeshua and His talmidim would return most nights with the assurance of a hot meal and easy rest. This was the fourth Passover in the three and a half years of Christ's ministry.

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of Him but also to see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. When the pilgrims made known Christ's arrival at Bethany, many common people from Galilee and other parts flocked out from the City to see the maverick Rabbi. They wanted to see Lazarus also, who had been four days in the tomb. A miracle like this had never been seen before in human history. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead the Sanhedrin had plotted to kill Yeshua (see **Ib - The Plot to Kill Jesus**). Now they wanted to destroy both Lazarus and the One who raised him. It is ironic that Caiaphas had already said: **Don't you realize that it's better for one man die for the people than the whole nation perish.** But one was not enough. Now it had to be two. Thus does evil grow. For the Sadducees, Lazarus was a double embarrassment. **For on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in Him,** but he was also a standing condemnation of their doctrine. They denied the resurrection and here was a man who had lived through death!¹²⁴⁰ **So the Sadducees made plans to destroy the evidence and kill Lazarus as well (Yochanan 12:9-11).**