

## Martha and Mary

### Martha and Mary - two sides of the same coin

The New Testament records three encounters that Martha and Mary had with Jesus.

#### First encounter

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 only one thing is needed, Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." **Luke 11<sup>38-42</sup>**

Martha opened her home - we often forget that it was Martha that invited Jesus to her house in the first place. Martha was probably the older of the sisters.

Mary sat at the Lord's feet was more than just where she was positioned. John Ortberg puts it like this:

This is not just a description of her location in the room. And it certainly doesn't mean that Jesus wanted Mary to do nothing the rest of her life but sit around. It is an assertion that Mary has made the fundamental decision of her life. To "sit at someone's feet" was a technical expression in ancient times to indicate the relationship between a disciple and a rabbi. For instance, when Paul described his credentials to a Jewish crowd in Jerusalem he put it like this: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of educated strictly..."

To make someone your rabbi was fundamentally a choice about being with him. A disciple was someone who had chosen to be with his rabbi as much as possible in order to learn as much as he could from him. ***God is Closer Than You Think***

So Mary was not simply sitting there, she was following Jesus around wherever he went. She had decided to devote her life to him and made the most of his time staying with the sisters.

Martha was not doing anything wrong but she became distracted by the things she was doing. She had forgotten the reason she had invited Jesus in the first place. She was "worried and upset about many things" - not at peace - a sign of not trusting in the Lord.

In this instance, Mary had "chosen what is better" (literally the better portion - a play on words because Martha was preparing food), which was to commit herself to Jesus first.

Some people use this as an excuse for waiting until they are "holy enough" to be able to do God's bidding. In which case, they never get round to doing anything. This leaves us condemned or condemning others or pretending to be something we are not. Legalism/religion masquerading as a more "spiritual" way.

When Jesus said that "it will not be taken away" he meant it. This is something we all need to realise that we do not need to perform or reach some standard. Jesus is committed to us for ever. His love will not be taken away even when we fail him, which brings us to the next part of the story.

#### Second encounter

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

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."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" **John 11<sup>1-44</sup>**

Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus. They were saying "Come now - we need you!" However, he stayed where he was. We need to learn to wait on him trusting that he knows our needs best. He doesn't always come when and in a way we expect him to, but he is never late.

It was Martha who went out to meet him and Mary stayed where she was. Was Mary disappointed in Jesus? Was her faith weaker than she thought? Was she ashamed of herself?

Martha states her issue (If you had been here...) but goes on to express her faith and she waits on Jesus. Jesus responds with one of the best known statements in the bible (I am the resurrection and the life.). She knows who he is and confesses her faith in him (You are the Christ.).

Martha returns to the house and brings Mary. Mary comes when called. Jesus has not moved and he waits for Mary to come to him. Mary makes the same comment as Martha. Unlike Martha she does not go on to express her faith that Jesus was the Christ. Was she accusing or bitter? Was there a lack of depth in her commitment to him a feeling of being let down?

They were both upset at the death of Lazarus but reacted differently. They had different personalities and ways of dealing with their pain. Both had faith at the right time and both made mistakes. They needed each other for balance - so do we.

Why did Jesus weep? He knew he would raise Lazarus. The only other recorded instance of Jesus weeping, was over Jerusalem.

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace - but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you. **Luke 19<sup>41-44</sup>**

He wept because they failed to recognise who He was and missed God's salvation for them at that time. It would be reasonable to conclude that it was Mary's failure to see who Jesus was that caused Jesus to weep

### **Third encounter**

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint<sup>1</sup> 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.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.<sup>2</sup>" He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

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<sup>1</sup> Greek: Litra about 0.5 litre

<sup>2</sup> 300 Denarii

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." **John 12<sup>1-11</sup>**

Martha was doing the practical stuff - what she does best. Probably at their house (Lazarus was there)

The expensive perfume that Mary brought was possibly everything she had (her dowry) and she poured it on Jesus' feet as a sacrifice.

Jesus defends her saying that it was intended for his burial, so it was prophetic. It was extravagant - an act of devotion.<sup>3</sup> In the light of the previous two passages, it was also an act of repentance.

Mary had devoted herself to Jesus but when tested over the death of her brother, she failed to believe in Jesus and this was her coming back to him. She wiped his feet with her hair, humbling herself. Had she heard about the other (sinful) woman in Luke chapter 7?

### Summary

- Staying close to him is important but doing his will as a result of this is equally important. I will show you my faith by my actions (**James 2<sup>18</sup>**)
- We do not have to wait until we are perfect or holy enough to do his will. God sees Jesus in us and we are made perfect in His eyes.
- Different personalities have different strengths and weaknesses. We need one another and to learn from one another.
- Don't confuse personality with spirituality. No one person or personality type has a monopoly on hearing God. God made all of us - different, unique, to work together in unity of purpose.
- Spirit-led action from the heart of the Father. Like Jesus, doing only what we see the Father doing.
- Being Charismatic
  - Being led by and using the gifts of the Holy Spirit in reaching out to the community around us.
  - Not one *or* the other, not "middle-of-the-road" compromise, but embracing both one *and* the other (the "radical middle")

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<sup>3</sup> Some people change the meaning of the words of Jesus here to mean that we will always have poor people, so work amongst the poor is secondary to worshipping Jesus. Jesus understood the motivation and lack of sincerity behind Judas' comment. Jesus repeatedly told us to look after the poor for example Matthew 11<sup>5</sup>, Matthew 25<sup>45</sup>, Mark 10<sup>21</sup> and Luke 4<sup>18</sup>

## Instances in the Gospels of Jesus being anointed by women

Details	Luke 7	John 12	Mark 14	Matthew 26
Time	Not recorded	6 days before Passover	2 days before Passover	
Location	A town	Bethany		
Who	A woman who had lived a sinful life	Mary	A woman	
Container	Alabaster jar	Not recorded	Alabaster jar	
Contents	Perfume	Pure nard		Very expensive perfume
Anointed	Jesus' feet		Jesus' head	
Other actions	Wiped Jesus' feet with her hair		Not recorded	
Reason	Not recorded	Day of my burial	Prepare for burial	
Host	Simon the Pharisee	Not recorded	Simon the Leper	
Critic(s)		Judas Iscariot	Some present	The Disciples
Criticised	Jesus	Mary	The woman	