

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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**Broadcast Date:** 21 April 2002

**No.** T0210

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## Double Calls: More Double Calls in Scripture: Martha, Martha!

Last year, in this *Truth for Today* programme, we looked at those characters in the Old Testament who were called by God, calling their name twice. Perhaps, like me, you have had the experience of meeting a friend whose name you should know, but it's gone from you. Try as you will, it just won't come back! It gets worse as you grow older!

When God calls, He calls by name because each person is known to Him and matters to Him. Jesus told His listeners that one of the marks of a good shepherd is that "he calls his own sheep by name". He then went on to say, "I am the good shepherd, and I know my sheep" (John 10:3, 14). Yes, each one of us is known personally to God - each one of us in this world of some 6,000 million people! But just occasionally in the Bible, God calls people by their name twice. These are generally situations of some urgency. There could be no greater urgency than when Abraham, on Mount Moriah, in obedience to God's command, had the knife ready in his hand to kill his son, Isaac. Abraham's faith had been tested to the limit, and was not found wanting. In an urgency fuelled by the knowledge that, centuries later, He would give His own Son, Jesus, to die at Calvary, God called to Abraham, "Abraham, Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the lad" (Genesis 22:12). We also looked at Jacob, Moses and Samuel, each one called by name twice over by God. Today, we begin a series on New Testament characters who were called twice over by their name or title. The first is Martha. We read about her in Luke 10:38-42. We'll read the verses: Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her"

Suppose you were to be banished to the opposite ends of the earth, never to return to this country. Is there some favourite place you would like to see just once before you left? For me, that would have to be Friars Crag on Derwentwater, near Keswick. I'd want to drink in, for one final time, the peaceful loveliness of that view down the lake to Borrowdale. I believe that Bethany, Martha's village, was just such a place to the Lord Jesus. I say that for two reasons. Firstly, the Gospel writers tell us that just before His crucifixion, in that week that led up to what we call Good Friday, the Lord Jesus spent His days speaking to the people in Jerusalem. But where did He spend His nights? Was it in that religious centre with its temple? No! Each evening, though undoubtedly tired by His ministry, the Lord Jesus, with His disciples, was prepared to walk the two mile journey back to Bethany. Secondly, it is Luke, the Gospel writer who first introduces us to Martha of Bethany, who tells us that the Lord Jesus, after His death and resurrection, took His disciples and "led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven" (24:50-51). Bethany would be the last place the Lord looked at as He left this world to go back to heaven.

What was it that made Bethany such a special place to the Lord Jesus? After all, the Bible tells us nothing at all about its scenery, about how many people lived there. But it does tell us that it was in Bethany that Martha received Him into her house! Martha's welcome must have meant so much to the Lord Jesus since He had only just declared at the end of Luke 9, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (verse 58). But there was a welcome for Him in Martha's house!

Of course, the Lord Jesus gladly accepted Martha's invitation. Years later, as the Lord of glory, He would say to the church at Laodicea, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20). Incidentally, that lovely promise of Jesus is still true today. He is still ready to come into hearts which are opened to receive Him as Saviour. But He won't come in uninvited!

Martha had a sister, Mary, and also a brother, Lazarus, whom we read about in John's Gospel. While Martha busied herself in getting a meal ready for the Lord Jesus, Mary sat quietly at the feet of Jesus, taking in His every word. I'm sure that Martha would want that meal to be just perfect. You've probably known the feeling - you've got visitors coming and things aren't ready. Nothing seems to be going right; the Yorkshire puddings aren't rising and the custard's burned! Suddenly it all gets too much and temper's pressure valve blows! Martha probably felt just like that.

And there was Mary, doing nothing to help, just sitting listening to Jesus. So Martha bursts out, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me".

Let's digress for a moment or two to recall that other occasion when disciples called out to the Lord, "Don't You care?" Mark tells us of that time when Jesus was with His disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. A storm arose suddenly and the boat looked like sinking. In the midst of the storm, Jesus was there asleep. He could sleep in the sure confidence of His Father's unceasing protection. So the disciples awake Him, crying, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" (4:35-41). Often, in the storms of life, we might be tempted to cry to the Lord, like Martha and the disciples, 'Don't You care?' But Martha and the disciples knew nothing yet of Calvary. In your moments of despair, come to the foot of the cross. See the Lord Jesus laying down His life in love for you. You cannot then really cry, "Don't you care". Peter later learned that lesson and wrote in his first epistle, "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). He cares for me! He cares for you!

It was just because He cared for Martha that Jesus called to her in this urgency of love, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things". Of course, the Lord Jesus greatly appreciated Martha's hospitality and kindness. But in His love for her, He wanted to help her to get her priorities right. It's still difficult for us today to get priorities right!

In the temptation in the wilderness, Satan tried to move the Lord away from His proper priorities. Satan was defeated by the Lord's uncompromising stand: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4). The spiritual bread of God's word was far more important than any material loaf of bread.

So the Lord would turn Martha's attention away from the many things that troubled her - the cleaning and the cooking - to the one thing which really mattered. Yes, the cleaning and the cooking are important, and for the Christian, they are included in Paul's charge to the Corinthians: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Mary had got her priorities right. So the Lord says to Martha, "But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her". Tomorrow, that lovely meal would be only a happy memory. But the things which Mary had learned from the Lord would stay with her forever.

So it is with us today. The material things with which we love to surround ourselves will one day have to be left behind. But what we have learned of the Lord Jesus, His salvation, His loveliness, His power, His grace - these things we will carry with us through in to eternity. They will form part of that eternal praise we will give to Him. But that means that, amidst the business of each day, we need to find time, like Mary, to hear His words. We will do that as we read His word, the Bible, and ask Him to speak to us by His Holy Spirit from its pages. We will hear His word as our hearts are opened up to Him in quiet prayer, not filling up that time with what we want to say to Him and ask of Him, but being prepared to listen to what He wants to say to us in the quietness of our hearts.

Although in our talk today we are thinking primarily of Martha, it is worth noting that whenever we read of Mary in the New Testament, she is always at the feet of the Lord Jesus. Here, she is at His feet in communion. In John 11:32, when their brother, Lazarus had died, she is at the feet of Jesus in her sorrow. And finally, in John 12:3, when she pours her precious, fragrant oil on the feet of Jesus, she is at His feet in worship. Someone has written,

*Low at Thy feet, Lord Jesus,  
This is the place for me.  
There I have learned deep lessons,  
Truths that have set me free.*

Make sure that you spend time each day at the feet of Jesus. Then all the other things of life will fall into their proper place.

Two other episodes in Martha's life stand out. In John 11, as we have already touched on, Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, fell ill. But Martha and Mary know what to do: "Therefore the sisters sent to [Jesus], saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick" (verse 3). Instinctively, in their need, they turn to Him. They knew enough about Him to know that He cared. In our need, let us be as ready to turn to Him. He's only a prayer away!

That care of Jesus is underlined by John as he writes, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (verse 5). But John goes on to add, "So, when He heard that [Lazarus] was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was" (verse 6). Notice that little word, 'so'. What? Jesus loved Martha but deliberately didn't go straight away to help her! That's the message of these verses. But Martha was to learn something of the power and sympathy of the Lord Jesus in a way which would have been impossible had He gone to her straight away and cured Lazarus' illness.

Do you sometimes wonder and fret about the fact that the Lord doesn't seem to answer your prayers in the way and in the time you think He should? Be assured that it's never because of a lack of love on His part. You and I can only see the little picture, as it were. But He sees the big picture of God's perfect plan for our blessing.

So when, in His Father's perfect timing, Jesus eventually arrives in Bethany, Lazarus is already dead and buried. Martha challenges Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother had not died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You" (John 11:21-22). Even though Martha could not understand the reason for Jesus' delay, she still had faith in Him. When Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise again", Martha replies, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (verses 23-24). But the One who would exercise that resurrection power in the last day was standing before her that very moment! So the Lord Jesus can answer her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die" (verses 25-26).

Martha would see that resurrection power there and then! Jesus goes with Martha and Mary to the tomb of Lazarus. He commands that the stone which covered the entrance to the cave where the body of Lazarus lay be removed. Martha protests, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days" (verse 39). Nevertheless, they obey Jesus' command. Jesus stands before that open sepulchre and, in a loud voice, commands, "Lazarus, come forth!" (verse 43). In John 5, the Lord Jesus had said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live... the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (verses 25-29). We read in the Gospels of three people who had died and, hearing the voice of Jesus, were raised to life - Jairus' daughter, the son of the widow of Nain, and now Lazarus. These all lived to die again. But in a coming day, that same voice of Jesus will summon all, without exception, from the dead. The Lord Jesus is coming soon to take all those who have trusted Him as Saviour, i.e. "who have done good" in obedience to His word, to be with Him forever. In that day, those who have died, together with those who are still alive, will "be caught up together ... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Theirs will be the resurrection of life.

But for those who have refused Christ's offer of salvation, "who have done evil" there will remain only that solemn and awful "resurrection of condemnation". Listener, hear the voice of the Lord Jesus today and live!

Finally, we shall read the few verses - few but very important - which tell us about the last time we meet Martha in the Bible: "Then six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then took Mary a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil" (John 12:1-3).

Here, Martha is in her element. She's got her priorities right - and she's serving. Lazarus, in his new life, sits at the table in fellowship with the Lord Jesus. Mary comes and, in worship, anoints the feet of Jesus with her precious, fragrant oil. In this three-fold blend of activity - of service, fellowship and worship - the Lord Jesus was honoured in this special way on that day just before He was crucified. They might never have had another opportunity, but they seized it at the right time and honoured Him.

The Lord Jesus is coming soon to take those who love Him to be with Him in heaven. Let us each one show our love to Him now in this happy blend of service, fellowship and worship.

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