

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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I am the Resurrection and the Life: Jesus and Martha and Mary (John 11:20-36)

John 11:1-57 is one of the most profound chapters in the New Testament. It deals with the mystery of suffering, the reality of death and the power of resurrection.

We have already seen in John 11:1-19 how the story of the death of Lazarus unfolds. It begins with Martha and Mary sending news to Jesus about Lazarus being ill (John 11:3). In John 11:4, Jesus explains that Lazarus' sickness would not end his life on earth but would be a means by which the Son of God would be glorified. In John 11:5 we are told about Jesus' love for Martha, her sister, Mary and Lazarus. Jesus then waits two days before going to Judea. Visiting the region of Judea concerned the disciples of Jesus because the Jews there had threatened to stone their Master (John 11:6-8). In John 11:9, Jesus uses the daylight as a metaphor for walking in the will of God irrespective of the dangers that may be faced.

In John 11:11, Jesus describes Lazarus as "our friend", his death as "sleep" and his resurrection as being "woken up." The disciples thought Jesus was simply talking about Lazarus resting until Jesus explained Lazarus was dead, (John 11:12-15). The whole experience had a depressing effect on Thomas, who said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" (John 11:16). By the time Jesus and his disciples arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days and there were a large number of mourners in Bethany, (John 11:17-19). So, the scene is set for the greatest miracle Jesus performed during his ministry.

In John 11:20 we read, "Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house." The first time Martha is mentioned in the New Testament is in Luke 10:38: "Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house."

Martha comes across as a larger-than-life character. She seems a warm-hearted, hard working woman who was always ready to speak her mind. The experiences we read of in Luke 10:38-42 and John 11:1-12:8 may not have happened had Martha not taken the initiative to welcome Jesus into her home. It was her desire to respond to the Saviour and it began a series of events through which Jesus teaches us so much about living in fellowship with Him.

Although Martha loved to serve she could also become over-anxious about the circumstances of life. We discover this anxiety as she busily prepares a meal for Lord Jesus and his disciples, "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'" (Luke 10:40).

You can imagine Martha's feelings as she worked away and noticed her sister sat listening to what the Saviour had to say with no interest in being in the kitchen. We can understand that it was a natural reaction for Martha to feel that her sister should be helping her and she let the Saviour know her feelings and asked him to get Mary to help her. What happens next is very interesting. We might have been tempted to keep the peace and encourage Mary to help Martha but Jesus says, "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" (Luke 10:41-42).

When Jesus uses someone's name twice it adds a particular emphasis to what He is about to say. The first thing He speaks about is Martha's state of mind highlighting her worried and troubled spirit when work got on top of her. She wanted so much to serve the Lord but then discovered the work was also very demanding. Jesus points out that it was not only preparing meals that was worrying Martha but also many other things. The Lord was not being unkind to Martha but he had not come into the world to be served but to serve: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

In effect, the Lord was saying to Martha, "Take the opportunity to sit in my presence and discover the peace and calm I can bring to your heart when you have fellowship with me." He describes this in Matthew 11:28-29, "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-29).

Jesus wanted Martha to be free from worry and anxiety and to be able to serve with an unburdened heart. To do that she had to do something which did not come easily to her. She had to sit quietly in the Lord's presence and listen to what He had to say. This was a lesson David speaks about when he writes at the beginning of Psalm 23, *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul"* (Psalm 23:1-3). Later in the Psalms we read, *"Be still, and know that I am God"* (Psalm 46:10).

But Martha had also drawn attention to her sister and effectively accused her of laziness. The Lord defends Mary's choice as a spiritual decision. Mary had chosen *"that good part"* (Luke 10:42) and the Lord would not send her away. It must have been very difficult for Martha to hear these words. I have five sisters and none of them likes to hear about their shortcomings in front of the others!

Martha thought her service was the most important thing and we often feel the same way. We think that what we do is of the highest importance and, of course, that makes us feel important. But, as Christians, when we undertake any task in our own strength we lose sight of the most fundamental aspect of service, *"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5).

Mary began this journey in Luke 10:38-42. She understood, more than even the Lord's own disciples did, that the key to spiritual power begins and continues at the feet of Jesus.

Abiding in the Lord's presence and learning of Him makes us fruitful and produces within us a Christ likeness which enables us to undertake everyday living and service joyfully and contentedly. Happily we see Martha displaying these features in John 12: *"Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, 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).

In these verses, John 12:1-3, we have a very touching illustration of three key features of Christianity, service, fellowship and worship. Martha is spoken of first. It simply says, *"Martha served."* No mention is made of worry or trouble. Martha seems to have been taken by the Saviour into a place where her gift is expressed in joyful humility. Lazarus is in fellowship with Jesus at the table and finally Mary enters to anoint the feet of Jesus as an expression of worship.

In John 11:20-36, Martha's energy is on display again when, in John 11:21-22, she immediately goes to Jesus on hearing of his arrival: *"Now Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.'"*

In John 11:21-22 Martha expresses an understanding that if Jesus had been present when Lazarus became ill He would have been able to heal her brother and he would not have died. Mary uses the same words in John 11:32. The sisters believed that whatever the illness was Jesus was able to cure it. Of course, we know that Jesus only had to speak to still the storm (Mark 4:39) or heal the lame, blinded and diseased and even raise the dead (Mark 5:42). But it was the faith of the centurion in Matthew 8:5-13 which demonstrated that Jesus did not need to be present to heal somebody but He had the power to heal from a distance. *"And Jesus said to him, 'I will come and heal him.' The centurion answered and said, 'Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.' When Jesus heard it, He marvelled, and said to those who followed, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!'"* (Matthew 8:7-10).

Neither Martha nor Mary had come to a complete understanding of the person and power of Christ but they had a real faith in Him. Understanding the presence of Christ is an important lesson. When the Lord Jesus was present on earth, as God incarnate, he could be seen, and heard and touched as John later describes, *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life - the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us."* (1 John 1:1-2).

We have the natural tendency to think that when Jesus was on earth he was restricted to one place. We should not forget He is God and His presence and power are not restricted to time and place. John at the beginning of his Gospel describes the deity of Christ, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made"* (John 1:1-3).

Paul writes in Colossians 1, *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist”* (Colossians 1:15-17).

Jesus gives us an insight into His omniscience (that is, His power to know everything) when He told His disciples Lazarus was dead in John 11:14. He was not physically present yet He knew all Lazarus' circumstances. We have a similar example in John 1:48 when the Lord says to Nathanael, *“Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”* Nathanael's response was one of worship, *“Nathanael answered and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’”* (John 1:49).

Although Martha did not yet have this understanding the Person of Christ she does declare her faith in Him, *“But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.”* Jesus responds to her faith by the comforting words, *“Your brother will rise again”* (John 11:23). Martha relates this to the future resurrection when she replies, in John 11:24, *“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”*

Jesus then makes one of the most profound statements in the New Testament, *“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. Do you believe this?”* (John 11:25-26).

Here Jesus is revealing something new. Lazarus would be raised but would die again and await the resurrection day but what Jesus says here is unfolded by Paul in his teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, *“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words”* (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18).

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18 show, with wonderful clarity, that it is Jesus who is *“The Resurrection and the Life”* (John 11:25). In the rapture described in the above verses, Jesus is the resurrection to those who have died in Christ and He also the fullness of life to the living saints through an immediate change which transforms all the saints into the completeness of eternal life in Christ.

Martha did not understand this revelation. Her thoughts, very naturally, were about the here and now and about the grief which death brings. But let us not forget she was the woman to whom the Lord spoke these remarkable words. He also asked her if she believed what he had said. What is very poignant is the wonderful simplicity yet depth of Martha's reply based on her personal faith in Christ. She did not, and neither do any of us, fully understand the greatness of the Person of Christ, but she said what she believed, *“She said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world’”* (John 11:27).

She is one of the few people who we read of in the New Testament who declare so clearly their faith in the Son of God. What she said must have touched the Lord's heart especially in view of His own coming death and resurrection. Their conversation appears not to have ended there because we are told Jesus asked Martha to call Mary: *“And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, ‘The Teacher has come and is calling for you’”* (John 11:28).

It is good to see the interaction between these very different sisters. You have a sense that the nearer they came to Christ the nearer they were drawn to each other. Although we may be Christians, and sometimes related to each other by natural ties, we are still different. Those differences can be small or great. But Christ is manifested in us through our unique personalities and associated characteristics. These differences often create distances between us. What Christ teaches us, and I think we have a sense of this in our passage this morning, is that the closer we are to Him the closer we are to each other. This is a little like the spokes in a bike wheel. The nearer to centre the spokes are the closer they are to each other. Mary immediately responds to Martha's news, *“As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him”* (John 11:29).

I don't think Mary was simply hesitant or timid but I do think she had learned from the experience of being in the Lord's presence. She had learned to wait. Waiting is not the easiest of spiritual virtues to learn but it is a vital one. We live in a world where people generally do not like to wait. It is a characteristic which also affects Christians as well. We like things to be provided immediately from fast food to fast finance. But in the Bible the idea of waiting is presented in a very positive light and so well summed up in Isaiah 40:30-31, *“Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”*

This spiritual waiting has the meaning of prayerfully seeking God's mind, receiving His direction and power to act in way which glorifies Him in our lives. It is a spiritual habit which influences the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of our lives.

In John 11:30 we read, *"Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met Him."* In coming to Bethany and to a family He loved Jesus Himself moved in a circumspect way. The Lord was never loud or grand in His movements. I was recently told by a sister, I greatly value, that I did some things too quickly. I have reflected on her comments a few times and have come to the conclusion she is right! However, I must confess to having difficultly slowing myself down so it's going to take some work with the Lord's help. The Lord always moved at the right pace and Mary had begun to learn how to follow in step.

Mary also had an influence, *"Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, 'She is going to the tomb to weep there'"* (John 11:31). Without taking John 11:31 out on context, it serves as reminder that our behaviour as Christians is often observed especially in times of crisis. Mary was watch closely and her behaviour is Christ centred. *"Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died'"* (John 11:32).

In each of the three places Mary is mentioned in the New Testament she is found at the feet of Jesus. In Luke 10:39 she listens at the feet of Jesus, here, (John 11:32), she weeps in sorrow at the feet of Jesus, and at the beginning of John 12 she worships at the feet of Jesus (see John 12:3).

John 11:33 describes the reaction of the Lord to the sorrow the death of Lazarus had inflicted upon Mary, Martha and his is friends, *"Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled."*

In contrast to the Lord's remarkable and all-powerful statement that He is *"the Resurrection and the Life"* (John 11:25) we now see the utter tenderness of His heart and the way in which He suffers in fellowship with His people at times of great sorrow and pain. In this passage it takes Him all the way to the grave of Lazarus, *"And He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to Him, 'Lord, come and see'"* (John 11:34).

In the first chapter of this wonderful Gospel John writes about two of John the Baptists disciples who follow Jesus, *"...they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?' They said to Him, 'Rabbi' (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), 'where are You staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see'"* (John 1:37-38).

The One who invites us to come into fellowship with Him is here seen as the One who comes to where sin takes us. It has been well said that Jesus came to where we were so that we could be where He is. Before Jesus goes to the cross and He Himself is laid in a tomb He comes to the place where sin has brought us all - the place of death (see Romans 6:23). At that place, the grave of His friend Lazarus, the briefest words express the deepest feelings of the Lord Jesus, *"Jesus wept"* (John 11:35). This outpouring of the Saviour's grief is a profound expression of the Saviour's love, *"Then the Jews said, 'See how He loved him!'"* (John 11:36).

Next week, God willing, we shall study the details of the Lord's resurrection of Lazarus. This morning let us take into a new week the wonderful sense of the power the Lord Jesus as *"the Resurrection and the Life"* (John 11:25) and the security and comfort this gives to our hearts. Let us also thank God that He is both all knowing and sympathetic towards each of us in the variety of circumstances we pass through. Finally, let us value the fellowship we are part of and draw closer to Saviour and in doing so be draw closer to each other in love.

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