

Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:28-38; 12:1-8)

One of my heroes in the Bible is Mary of Bethany. Why? Because she is the greatest lover of God that I know of. Mary appears only THREE times in the gospels and disappears just as quickly. She is not a very charismatic personality.



In all the three occasions she appears in the gospels, we find her 'at the feet of Jesus.' She never had any large public ministry at any time, but she was a true worshiper with a deep devotion to the Lord! To me, her life is one of the purest demonstrations of what it means to be a 'lover of God.'

Therefore, Mary is the prophetic picture of the end time church, the 'Bride of Christ'.

1. Mary at Jesus' Feet, Listening - Luke 10:38-42

Here Jesus is in Bethany and Martha invites Him over a meal.

- a. Martha is busy cooking, cleaning & entertaining the guests. But Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening intently and absorbing every word coming out of Jesus' heart. Martha is getting frustrated and becoming angry at Mary. She demands Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help her. Jesus' answer must have surprised both Mary and Martha.
- b. This was not a dig at Martha who was diligently serving. In the original language, there is no indication that Mary didn't help Martha earlier. (She probably did her part and then sat down.) But the point, Jesus started teaching the disciples, but Martha chose to be in the kitchen directing her energy to cooking, i.e. ministry to people, instead of listening to Jesus' words as He spoke from His heart.
- c. Jesus says, '*Martha, Martha, you are worried about many things, **but only one thing is important.** Mary has chosen a good part and it will not be taken away from her.*'

'The better part' is taking time to connect to Jesus and listening to His heartbeat. Our service flows out of that place of sitting at His feet. Devotion comes before Ministry.

- d. When we stop listening to the heartbeat of God and serve in our own strength, our service very quickly becomes a chore and duty. It soon leads to complaints and dissatisfaction.

Which is easier? Being busy in service? Or sitting at Jesus' feet and hearing Him?

- e. This is true of all human relationships, including marriage. It takes 'time' to sit at someone's feet to listen to their heartbeat. So also, it is with the Lord.

2. Mary at Jesus' Feet Weeping - John 11:20-38

Jesus came to Bethany again, this time in response to the SOS message about Lazarus being very sick.

- a. Now it's been already four days since Lazarus died, so his body is decomposing. (We probably won't decompose so quickly these days because of all the preservatives we eat.) The two sisters are in profound grief. They hear Jesus is finally coming into the town. Martha runs to him, '*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*' (v21) Remember, Jesus deliberately delayed his coming?

Jesus: '*Martha, I am the resurrection and life. Don't worry, your brother will rise again.*'

Martha: '*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*' Martha was a better theologian than the disciples! The first woman disciple to declare Jesus's identity as the Christ and the Son of God. She had an impeccable theology, but still missed it. Jesus had a hidden purpose in the delay.

- b. Martha goes back home and tells Mary to go and see Jesus. Mary too runs to Jesus, and finds Him in exactly the same spot (v30). She falls at Jesus' feet and cries, '*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*' (v32) – exactly the same words as Martha! But the Bible records a very different response from Jesus, 'Jesus groaned in his spirit, He was troubled.' Then comes the famous shortest verse in the Bible, 'Jesus wept.' (v35) Then he asked. '*Where did you lay him?*' (v34), then '*Lazarus, come forth.*' (v43)

- c. Both Martha and Mary were exactly at the 'same place' and said exactly the 'same words'; but produced two very different responses from Jesus! Two different 'people' and 'hearts' drew different responses from Jesus!

The secret is not in 'the words' or 'the place' or even how much theology we know, but the quality of our relationship with Him! 'God is love, and the love in our hearts (though imperfect) makes a profound impact on God's heart.'

3. Mary at Jesus' Feet Worshipping - John 12:1-8

Jesus comes again to Bethany SIX days before the Passover. I believe Jesus came to Bethany for encouragement before He faced the greatest trial of his life. (c.f. Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9)

- a. The scene opens at the dinner table again in Simon the leper's house. They were probably poor. Martha the Kitchen Captain is serving the table as usual. We can imagine Lazarus mesmerizing the crowd with the story of *'life after death and back!'* Suddenly Mary walks into the room, carrying an alabaster jar of very costly perfume. She 'breaks' the jar and anoints Jesus' head and feet. Mary then rubs the fragrant oil on Jesus' feet with her hair. The whole room was filled with the fragrance of the perfume, and the floor was flooded with expensive oil running everywhere.
- b. The dinner guests were in shock and upset! Embarrassed and uncomfortable with the 'over the top' display of Mary's devotion. Then there is a mess to clean up on the floor! It makes no sense to anyone. 300 denarii was 300 days of wage. It must have been Mary's lifetime saving towards probably her wedding one day. The disciples said, 'Why this waste!' (Matt 26:8). How much perfume/oil do you need to smell good? Not much.
- c. Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She has done a 'good thing' for me.' (Matt 16:10) 'Beautiful thing' (NIV). Love is always a beautiful thing because it is extravagant. It doesn't calculate the cost. When it stops being extravagant, it stops being beautiful. The disciples were angry because they were looking at the expensive oil running down the floor. They called it a waste because Judas was helping himself from the treasury bag! But Mary didn't see the oil dripping onto the floor. She saw the valuable fragrant oil that landed on Jesus. So it was not a waste. This is the perspective of love.
- d. 'She has prepared it for My burial.' Jesus told His disciples of His impending death many times. They now only had SIX days to go. But the disciples did not get it. Why? Because they had a hidden agenda, too busy jostling for the top position. Their hearts were not at Jesus' feet, but on the 'throne'. But Mary had no trouble hearing Jesus. Why? Mary's heart was at Jesus' feet. Thus, Mary went and got the best she had and 'broke it'.

When Jesus was crucified, there was no time to properly anoint Jesus' body for burial. So some disciples quickly came and wrapped Jesus' body in linen clothes and put some perfume and spices on Him in a hurry. Thank God that Mary anointed Jesus' entire body in the most beautiful way before the burial, especially Jesus' feet that would walk up the hill to Golgotha.

Some say the perfume would've clung to Jesus' body six days later when He was hanging on the cross. Mary did this beautiful thing to Jesus on behalf of us all, anointing Jesus for a burial befitting the King. (C.f. Ps 45:7-8, Therefore God, Your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness more than Your companions. All your garments are scented with myrrh and aloes and cassia...)

- e. 'Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial for her!' (Matt 25:13) Jesus never gave such honour to anyone else, but only to Mary. Why? This is the purpose of the gospel hidden within God's heart from all eternity! This was the beautiful expression of 'love' for God embodied in this little unknown woman. This is what the gospel is all about! *The gospel of Jesus Christ is all about God's extravagant love for us expressed in giving His life for us on the cross, and our fitting response is to return the love to Him.*

Why did Mary **'break'** the alabaster jar? Because she didn't want any of the oil left. Mary didn't want to save any of it. She wanted 'all of it' to be poured out on Jesus! After this, we don't hear about Mary of Bethany again. She recedes to the background and disappears into history. She even got into trouble with Jesus' disciples for this act of sacrifice. Straight after this event, Judas shows his true colour. He makes a move to

sell Jesus for money. '...Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priest, and said, *'What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?'* (Matt 26:14-15)

- f. Love is always extravagant. 'Love has a reason that reason knows nothing of.' (French Proverb) Some years ago I began to see that our life is like that alabaster jar of expensive perfume. We do our best to save, preserve, and make our lives beautiful and valuable. As we serve the Lord in a costly way, sometimes we feel the pain of seeing our precious time, effort, service, and finance - years of sacrifice spilling and running down the floor - unnoticed, unappreciated, criticised, and trampled upon by men. We feel our devotion and service of love 'wasted.' C.f. Is 49:4.

May the Lord open our eyes to see that our 'precious oil' that we offered to the Lord landed on Jesus' head and feet and truly blessed His heart. Someone said, 'Let's waste our life on Jesus.' Isn't our life wasted anyway? We cannot save it. The question is how we spend it.

'For I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure is at hand...' (2 Tim 4:6-8)