

Who was Mary of Bethany in the Bible?

Mary of Bethany is one of the most beautiful characters in all of Scripture, and we can learn valuable lessons from studying her life. Mary was the sister of Martha, and her brother was Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. We see Mary three different times in the Bible, beginning with the incident in the home of her sister, Martha (Luke 10:38-42), where Jesus, and presumably the disciples who travelled with Him, were being entertained. Martha was so distressed and “distracted with much serving” and frustrated that her sister wasn’t helping that she actually rebuked Jesus, accusing Him of not caring that Mary sat at His feet while she did all the work. Jesus’ response gives us our first insight into Mary of Bethany. Jesus commended her for “choosing the better,” meaning that Mary’s desire to be near her Lord and hang onto His every word was far more beneficial than running herself ragged with preparations for a meal. Jesus further said that choosing the better thing, learning of the Lord, would not be taken away from Mary.

By “choosing the better,” Jesus meant that those whose priority in life is Christ, the knowledge of Him, and nearness to Him have chosen what will last through eternity, such as the “gold, silver and costly stones” referred to in 1 Corinthians 3:11-12. From this incident, we learn that those who are distracted with the mundane and earthly are building upon the foundation which is Christ with “wood, hay and straw,” materials which will not stand the fires that come to us in times of testing, nor will they be remembered in eternity. Martha’s rebuke of Jesus gives us insight into her heart and mind as she tried to make everything perfect and was so distracted that she lost sight of whom she was speaking to. Mary’s silence, which we will see again in another incident, indicates a lack of concern for herself, especially for defending herself. When we focus on Christ, He becomes our greatest passion and our tendency to self-absorption dims and fades.

The second incident in which Mary and Martha appear occurs in John 11 with the raising of their brother, Lazarus, from the dead. When Mary hears that Jesus has come and is calling for her, she immediately leaves the assembly of mourners in her home and rushes to meet Jesus. So great is her love for Him and her desire to please and obey Him that she leaves those who had come to comfort her to place herself in the arms of the greatest Comforter mankind has ever known. Jesus sees her great sorrow and weeps along with her, even though He knows her sadness is going to be short-lived and that her brother will be restored to her momentarily. In the same way, when we sorrow and grieve, our greatest comfort is found in Jesus, whose compassion is boundless. When we place our hand in the nail-scarred hand, we find comfort, peace and security, and we learn the truth of Psalm 30:5b: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

The third and final time we see Mary of Bethany is just days before Christ's crucifixion (John 12:1-8). A meal had been prepared, Martha was again serving while the resurrected Lazarus reclined at the table with Jesus and the disciples. At some point, Mary poured a pint of very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. In spite of criticism from Judas Iscariot about the waste of the costly substance, Mary said nothing. Rather, Mary allowed Jesus to defend her, which He does, saying that she has kept this perfume for His burial and has done a beautiful act of service to Him.

We see two amazing things about Mary here from which we can take our example. First, she seems to know that the time of Jesus' death on the cross was at hand, a fact that had escaped the disciples in spite of Jesus' clear declaration of this truth. No doubt Mary contented herself with listening to her Lord and meditating on His words, while the disciples bickered about who would be greatest among them in the kingdom. By doing so,

they missed the important truths Jesus was teaching them about His upcoming death and resurrection (Mark 9:30-35). How often do we miss spiritual truths because we are self-focused and overly concerned for our rewards, our status and our reputation among men?

Second, we see in Mary a settled conviction and confidence in her Lord, so much so that she is not compelled to defend herself in the face of criticism. How often do we jump at the chance to justify ourselves in the eyes of others who criticize and mock us, particularly where our faith is concerned? But if we, like Mary, make sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to Him our priority, we will have her depth of understanding, her passion for Christ, and her complete faith in His plan for our lives. We may not have Jesus sitting in our living rooms in person, but we have His Word, the Bible, and from it we have all the knowledge and understanding we need to live a life of secure and confident faith like Mary of Bethany.