

Who was Martha in the Bible?

Martha is a significant New Testament figure, a personal friend of Jesus, and someone with whom many women today identify. She lived in Bethany with her sister, Mary, and her brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead (John 11:1-15, 43-44). We meet Martha three times in the Bible, and each event helps to build a profile of this interesting woman.

The Bible first mentions Martha in Luke 10. She is in her home in Bethany, a small town near Jerusalem, where she is hosting Jesus and the disciples. Jesus was well-known to Martha and her siblings; in fact, Jesus loved this little family (John 11:5). On the day that Jesus visited, Martha's desire was to be a good hostess—to serve the best meal with the best possible presentation, for Jesus' sake. Her sister, Mary, however, was taking some time out to listen to Jesus (Luke 10:39). As Martha "was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made" (Luke 10:40), she became a little cross with Mary and spoke rather abruptly to the Lord: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" (verse 40). In this foolish utterance, Martha implied that Jesus did not care about her, and she gave the Lord a command, demanding that He force Mary to assist in the serving. In her busyness, Martha had taken her eyes off the Savior. Jesus, who was able to see into her soul, diagnosed her problem: she was worried and troubled about the serving and had no peace in her heart. He gently told Martha that a simple dinner was more than adequate, and He reminded her that Mary's decision to sit at His feet and hear His word was the better choice (verses 41-42).

We see Martha again just after her brother, Lazarus, had died (John 11). The sisters had sent for Jesus when Lazarus fell ill (verse 3), but He did not arrive in time to heal

him. When Jesus finally approached Bethany, four days after Lazarus' death, Martha ran out to meet Him and declared, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask" (John 11:21-22). Notice Martha's faith: she firmly believed that Jesus could have healed Lazarus of his illness. And her faith is not diminished by the fact that Jesus had arrived "too late." Jesus encourages Martha with one of His "I AM" statements: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (verses 25-26). Martha's response is one of great faith and understanding of Jesus' divine nature: "Yes, Lord . . . I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (verse 27). Martha's faith was rewarded that very day as she witnessed her brother's miraculous resurrection from the dead (verses 43-44).

The third time we encounter Martha in the Bible, she is doing what Martha was known to do—serving (John 12:2). Jesus is again attending a dinner in His honor in Bethany, and Martha is again serving. It is on this occasion that Martha's sister, Mary, anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume (verse 3). It becomes apparent that Martha was likely a woman of some means, evidenced by the size of her home, the frequency of her hosting dinners, and the expensive perfumed oil her sister owned.

In Martha's life-changing encounters with Jesus, we see the importance of balancing service with worship, of trusting the Lord even when all seems lost, and of using our material resources for the glory of God.