

Martha

The Woman Who Was More Practical Than Spiritual

Scripture Reference: Luke 10:38-41; John 11; John 12:1-3

Name Meaning: As a Chaldee or Syriac word, Martha is the feminine of moro or more, meaning "lord," "master." We find this in the form maran in the well-known phrase Maran-atha, "The Lord cometh" (1 Corinthians 16:22). There are those who think that Kyria, translated "lady" in 2 John 1, is a proper name, the Greek equivalent of this word. Carpzov supposes that this Kyria was the same person as Martha of Bethany.

Family Connections: Of the history of Martha, the Bible tells us nothing save that she was the sister of Mary and Lazarus, and lived with them at Bethany. Some early writers have made Martha, the daughter, wife, or widow of Simon the Leper, and that on his death the house became hers, hence the reference to the house when the resurrection of Lazarus was celebrated (Matthew 26:6; Mark 14:3). Others think that Martha may have been a near relative of Simon for whom she acted as hostess. But the narrative seems to suggest the home belonged to Martha and being older than Mary and Lazarus, she carried the responsibility of all connected with household affairs in a home where "Jesus found the curse of the sojourner lifted from Him, and, in reversal of His own description of His loneliness and penury, found where to lay His head." What strikes us forcibly is that after Jesus left His natural home at the age of thirty to enter upon His public ministry we do not read of Him returning to it for rest and relaxation. It was to the warm, hospitable home at Bethany to which He retired, for He loved the three who lived in it, Martha, Mary and Lazarus-in this order-which is something we do not read concerning His own brothers and sisters according to the flesh.

Martha and Mary seem to belong together in God's portrait gallery, just as Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau do. Expositors also bracket the two sisters together, comparing and contrasting their respective traits. Martha, busy with household chores-Mary, preferring to sit before Jesus for spiritual instruction. Martha, ever active and impulsive-Mary, meditative and reticent. Truly drawn are the characters of these two sisters, Martha usually busy supervising the hospitality of the home, Mary somewhat indifferent to house work, anxious only to seek that which was spiritual. But we have no Scriptural warrant for affirming that the difference between the quiet, pious Mary and her industrious sister is that of the opposite of light to darkness. In the church there are vessels of gold and others of silver, but we are not justified in saying that the character of Mary is worked in gold and that of Martha in silver. These two sisters in that Bethany family had their respective, appropriate talents, and each of them served the Master accordingly.

George Matheson deprecates the effort to always bracket Mary and Martha together. Each figure stands for itself alone. These sisters have "both suffered from being uniformly viewed in combination, and the bracketing has been more injurious to Mary than to Martha. To say that Mary stands in contrast to Martha is true, but it is inadequate." Too often "Martha has been held up to fine scorn as a worldly-minded and jealous creature, and Mary exalted for an indifference to the duties of hospitality, concerning which, for aught that we know, she may at various times have been quite as zealous as Martha." Let us, therefore, take these female characters separately, and beginning with Martha note how she nobly fulfilled her mission in life.

The majority of the women of the Bible are revealed to us in passing hints. None of them are as fully pictured as we would like. But when we look at Martha it does seem as if her character is more fully revealed than that of many other females. Luke gives us our first glimpse of her in "a piece of writing which is one of the marvels of literature," as H. V. Morton expresses it. "There is not one word we could do without, yet the picture is complete, and framed, as it were, by a kitchen door. Luke tells it in ninety-eight words" (Luke 10:38-42). We have scattered evidence as to Martha's ability to care for Jesus and the saints in the practical ways she did. Her home at Bethany was one of the few of social standing and substance with whom Jesus was on friendly terms. The hospitality afforded Him, the supper of some pretensions Martha provided for invited guests, the number and quality of friends who gathered around the sisters in the hour of their deep grief, and the wealth displayed in the anointing of Jesus, all alike bespeak of affluence. When Bethany is referred to as "the village of Mary and her sister, Martha," the implication is that they were important figures in the community and that their home was the chief one in the village. What, then, are the characteristics of Martha, the only Bible woman to have her name repeated, as Jesus did, when affectionately He said, "Martha! Martha!"?

She Was Most Hospitable

The first glimpse we have of Martha is that of one "given to hospitality," for we read she "received Jesus into her house"-her house, suggesting she was its owner. Then, when Jesus was sent for to hurry to the aid of her sick brother, Lazarus, we read that when Martha heard that Jesus was coming "she met Him," and bade Him welcome (John 11:20, 30). And the provision of that home meant much to Jesus. One day we have Him saying, "The Son of man hath not where to lay his head," but the next day, "He came to Bethany ... and Martha made him a supper." His lonely heart found in that loving, hospitable home a woman waiting to minister to His weariness and exhaustion, and from the swift-handed care of gentle womanhood Jesus received the physical refreshment He needed. Even when there was death in the home, the energetic and practical Martha dried her tears and went out to meet the Lord of life, leaving the mystical Mary sitting in the house still weeping. What a superb life-like touch that is! "Martha went and met Him: but Mary sat still in the house."

Knowing Martha as we do, we can be assured of this fact, that whenever Jesus visited Martha's home she never had any need to apologize for untidy rooms, a neglected household, or lack of necessary provisions. To her, home responsibilities were never a drudgery. Martha loved her home, was house-proud, kept it "spick and span," and was ever ready to entertain her divine Guest or others seeking a refuge beneath her hospitable roof. Eugenia Price expresses this aspect of Martha's character when she says-

The superb hospitality He found in Martha's home was extremely important to Him. No one enjoyed her cooking more than He enjoyed it. No one found her spacious home more beautiful, more inviting. But always He had the real issues in full view. He could not be distracted from them, even by His tired body and His human need of Martha's services.

She Was Meditative

We do not read the record of Martha and Mary aright if we think that the former did all the serving, and the latter all the sitting. Too often, we think of Mary as the meditative one, and Martha as the practical one. But the next glimpse we have of Martha shows us that she was found at Jesus' feet-"which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard His word." So both sisters studied in the College of the Feet. Conversely the phrase, "she has left me to serve alone," suggests that Mary joined her sister in the reception of Jesus, and worked with her for a while but betook herself to her place at Jesus' feet. We must not for a moment feel that Mary thought serving beneath her, or that Martha had the idea that sitting was beyond her spiritual capacity. Both sat before the Master, but while Mary thought that listening was better, Martha felt that feeding Jesus was just as necessary as waiting upon His word. Martha's practical service on His behalf was inspired by what she had heard from His lips and came of her love for Him. As George Matheson puts it- Every article on Martha's table was constructed out of sympathy, built of the fibres of her heart. The feast which she devised was the fruit of solicitude for Jesus and would have had no existence apart from that solicitude.

She Was Guilty of Complaint

Luke, who must have gone with Jesus to the house, noticed that "Martha was cumbered about much serving." The word "cumbered" means "distracted." It is God's will "that we attend upon the Lord without distraction" (1 Corinthians 7:35). But being the one who managed the household and served, Martha found herself drawn hither and thither by conflicting cares. She loved Jesus and wanted all in the house to do their best for Him. So we have her double complaint, with the first part of it directed to Jesus Himself, "Dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone?" The next half of the complaint was a command, "Bid her therefore that she help me." This means that if Jesus were still speaking to Mary sitting at His feet, her somewhat vehement complaint must have interrupted our Lord's calm demeanor while conversing with Mary. It irritated Martha to see Mary, cool and idle, while she was busy getting the meal ready for the visitors, and most likely their accommodation for a night or so.

It may have been that Martha was "secretly vexed with herself as much as with Mary, that the latter enjoyed the privilege of hearing Jesus' word seated at His feet, while she could not persuade herself to do the same for fear that a varied enough repast should not be served up to Him." It was as if Martha had said to Jesus, "Lord, here am I with everything to do, and this sister of mine will not lay her hand to anything; thus I miss something from Thy lips, and Thou from our hands-bid her, therefore, that she help me." Martha would not presume to call her sister away from Jesus to help. In her vexed state of mind she included Jesus in her rebuke, and asked Him to release Mary from the season of meditation to help out with practical duties.

She Was Rebuked by Jesus

In our Lord's answer to Martha's complaint there was no condemnation of her activity, for He must have appreciated her warmhearted, practical management of the household. He knew that she was seeking to entertain Him with her best, and so lovingly warned her of the danger of forgetting amid her many cares the one thing needful. In the repetition of her name, Martha! Martha! there is an affectionate reproof. The only other example of a twofold utterance of a name during our Lord's ministry was when He said, Simon! Simon! (Luke 22:31). From glory He said Saul! Saul! (Acts 9:4). Following His repetition in which there was a gracious blending of kindness, sadness and surprise Jesus went on to remind Martha that she was careful and troubled about many things but that one thing was needful the good part Mary had chosen and which He would not take away from her.

Jesus did not tell Martha that she had neither part nor lot in Him, or that she was allowing the cares of this life to choke the seed. He recognized that she was working for Him, but reminded her that she was permitting her outward activities to hinder her spiritually. Because of wrong emphasis regarding her necessary labor, her inner communion with her Lord was being hindered. In her restless activity Martha felt that her sister carried "her quiet, peaceful, faith-engendered mysticism" too far. H. V. Morton says that in our Lord's reply to Martha's complaint there can be traced a play of ideas, and that His words can be interpreted- Martha, Martha, you are busy with many courses when one dish would be quite sufficient. Mary has chosen the best dish, which shall not be taken away from her.

The term "careful" refers to inward worrying anxiety. Martha was mentally solicitous, anxious with a divided mind which is forbidden (Matthew 6:22-31; 1 Corinthians 7:32). "Troubled," means disturbed, distracted outwardly about many things or dishes. Fausset comments that "Much serving has its right place and time (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:12; 1 Timothy 5:14), but ought to give place to hearing when Jesus speaks, for faith whereby the good and abiding portion is gained, cometh by hearing" (Romans 10:17). The "good part" Mary chose was bias in the direction of that which is spiritual.

She Was Loved of the Lord

In a marvelous way John takes up where Luke leaves off, and with his skillful brush fills in the details of the character study of Martha the "practical." First of all, the "apostle of love" tells us that "Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus." How different were their personalities and temperaments, yet Jesus loved each of them with an equal love! He had a human heart enabling Him to love those who loved and cared for Him. So all three in that Bethany home had a place in His heart, and were embraced in His holy kindness. Such a love must have knit those sisters and their brother more closely and tenderly together than did even the bond of natural affection. Knowing all about Martha, Jesus loved her, and she in turn ardently loved Him and shared His confidence and became the recipient of a sublime revelation of her Lord.

She Was a Woman of Deep Sorrow

Sickness and death shadowed that loving, hospitable Bethany home. Lazarus fell sick, and his sister sent word to Jesus, "Behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick." Jesus did not hurry to Bethany but abode where He was, and by the time He reached Bethany Lazarus had been in his grave four days. Was He indifferent to the call and grief of Martha and Mary? Loving them, how could He be? He wanted them to learn that His delays are not denials; that He knows the exact moment to display His power. He knew that this was a death that would result in Him being glorified as the Son of Man (John 11:4). While many of the Jewish friends came to comfort grief-stricken Martha and Mary, they eagerly awaited the coming of the divine Comforter Himself and as soon as they heard He was on the way, Martha dried her tears and went out to meet Him, leaving Mary sitting disconsolate in the house. As soon as Martha met Jesus she uttered a rebuke in her usual blunt fashion, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." Then uncovering the real depths of her soul she hurried on to say, "But I know, that even now [with my dear brother in the grave] whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee." What unbounded faith and confidence in her Lord's omnipotence she had! A most remarkable conversation on the Resurrection followed between the Master and Martha. Immediately Jesus healed her broken heart by assuring her that her brother would rise again. No explanation of His delayed arrival was given. Jesus began right away to unfold the truth He meant both His delay and the death of Lazarus to convey.

A desolate heart now, in the presence of the Prince of Life, expressed its faith in a resurrection of the dead in "the jubilee of the ages," as Martha knew the ancient Hebrew Scriptures taught. What she was not prepared for was the revelation that the One before her was the Resurrection and the Life. Jesus sought to lead the thoughts of Martha away from her dead brother to Himself, the One in whom the yonder becomes the here. Martha thought of the resurrection of her much-loved brother as a far-off event, but Jesus asserts His claim to be in Himself the power by which the dead are raised. Martha's reply provided the Master an occasion to present one of the most outstanding statements in the Bible as to His deity, power and authority-"I am the resurrection and the life." How astounded Martha must have been as she listened in awe to the tremendous truths flowing from the lips of Jesus. When He challenged her with "Believest thou this?" she uttered a remarkable confession of faith which some professed Christians today, alas, cannot subscribe to-

*"Yea, Lord: I believe that Thou art
The Christ,
The Son of God,
which should come into the world."*

Although Martha could not fathom the depths of the Master's revelation of Himself, she believed and implied three wellknown titles to Him who loved her- The Christ-The One of whom glorious things had been predicted as the anointed prophet, priest and king. The Son of God-A confession of His deity, for this is a title pertaining not to His office or position, but to His nature and Person as the Only Begotten of the Father.

He that should come into the world-This was a common description among the Jews of Him who was at once the heart of prophecy, the object of the aspirations of all illuminated and reborn souls, and the desire of all nations (Haggai 2:7; Matthew 11:3).

With her heart stilled by the mighty and mysterious message of the Master, and yet more by the calm majesty of His presence, Martha confessed her faith, and while she did not fully understand the depth of her own words, the Lord's Resurrection from the dead enabled her to understand in some measure why He came into the world. Leaving Him after such an overwhelming experience, Martha went back to the home and called her sister "secretly," perhaps for fear of the Jews. This precious touch reveals how concerned Martha was for the safety and cause of Him who had done so much for her. Mary was told that the Master asked for her, and rose up "hastily" and went to Him. 'Tis love that makes our willing feet In swift obedience move.

Meeting Jesus, she fell down at the feet she had loved to sit at, and between her sobs repeated the complaint of Martha, "Lord, if thou hadst been here my brother had not died." Mary was in no way behind her sister in her love for her departed brother (John 11:19), her faith in the Lord Jesus (John 11:21), and in her belief in the final resurrection. The tears of Mary and of the mourning Jews moved the sympathetic spirit of Jesus, and affected by such sorrow He groaned in His spirit (John 11:33, 38). The groaning here was possibly an inner indignant feeling over the mockery of sorrow of the Jews whom He knew would try to kill Lazarus after his resurrection (John 11:47; 12:10), as well as kill Jesus also (John 11:53). It was this hypocrisy that stirred His spirit to anger so intense that it caused nerve and muscle and limb to tremble beneath its force. Then came the spectacle of "A God in Tears," for we come to the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept!" How true it is that in every pang that rends the heart, the Man of Sorrows shares a part! Here was the evidence of His humanity. At the grave Martha gives vent to her feelings again, and implied by her statement that as her dead brother's body had passed to corruption, it would be terrible to see him thus. But the miracle happened and the glory of God was manifested. Jesus uttered the all-commanding word, and Lazarus came forth, with a body fresher than it had been for years. Thus Jesus justified His claim to Martha of being "The Resurrection," not merely able to raise the dead, but also the Life-Power conquering the death-power in its own domain. The great I Am is the Resurrection for in Himself He has the keys of death. Then when He spoke of Himself as "The Life," He gave utterance to one of the most profound expressions in the Gospel (John 14:6). He is Life-the primal, all-originating, all comprehending, everlasting life. It is in Him we live.

She Was a Joyful Woman

What tears of joy both Martha and Mary must have shed as they embraced their brother risen from the dead! That physical miracle resulted in spiritual miracles, for many believed on Jesus. The last mention of Martha was at the supper in her home to celebrate the resurrection of Lazarus, and as usual she was active and served. While the guests were seated at her hospitable table, Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with costly spikenard, but Martha raised no objection. She acquiesced in her sister's preparatory act associated with Christ's own burial. For all that we know Martha may have had a large share in the purchase of the precious ointment, which Judas Iscariot thought was being wasted. While the service of Martha was the same, her spirit was blessedly changed. She was no longer "distracted" over her tasks, nor mentally anxious and outwardly bustling, but calm, trustful and in full agreement with her sister's act of love and devotion to the Master. At last Martha, too, has chosen that good part which could not be taken from her. It is more than likely that Martha was present with the two Marys and other devout women at the cross and then at the empty tomb of the Saviour, and joined them as a herald to the disciples that Christ was risen indeed (Matthew 28:1-11).

What are some of the lessons to glean as we think of the life and character of Martha? One of her noblest acts was to open her home to Jesus and entertain Him. She little knew at the beginning of His visits that He was the Son of God with power, and when we receive Him into our hearts as Saviour we do not know all there is to know of His majesty and power. Eternity alone will bring us the full revelation of why and what He is.

Further, Martha represents those dear religious women who allow themselves to be distracted overmuch with their home cares and obligations. Some are all Martha, and no Mary. Others are all Mary and no Martha. The happy combination is that of Martha and Mary, the practical and the spiritual making possible the glory of the commonplace. The church requires both the Marys and the Marthas for both are necessary to complete the Christian character (1 Timothy 4:13-16; James 1:25-27). From the records we have considered we surely learn, do we not?-

- 1. To sit at the feet of Jesus and learn of Him.**
- 2. To keep so-called secular service in its right place, conscious that both serving and learning are duties, and in both we should honor God.**
- 3. To trust the Lord with our cares, responsibilities and sorrows knowing that He is able to undertake for us. If His help appears to be delayed we must remember that He is never before His time, and that He never lags behind.**
- 4. To offer our best to Him who broke the alabaster box of His own body that heavenly forgiveness and fragrance might be ours.**