

The Cloud of Witnesses

Mary of Bethany

Lesson 1: Mary of Bethany – Sat At Jesus’ Feet

Reading

Luke 10:38-40.

Sat At Jesus’ Feet

The urgent will always rob us of the important.

Martha was a wonderful woman. Our reading suggests it was her home to which Jesus came and Martha was pleased to open it up to Him. As we read the other Gospel accounts, it appears Jesus went there quite frequently and that it was a haven for him, away from the constant attention of the crowd.

What an amazing blessing it must have been for Jesus to be able to turn in there for some down-time with friends. He could, as it were, put His feet up and relax as well as receiving refreshment for whatever lay ahead.

I’m emphasising this for a reason. Martha gets a bad press sometimes. However, Martha was a wonderful woman. She welcomed Jesus to her home and did all she could to make Him feel welcome and to meet all His physical needs.

Many people called Jesus their friend, but Martha was one of the few Jesus could really call His friend. She wanted to give, not just receive, and she wanted to give her best and the best for Jesus. Yes, indeed Martha was a remarkable lady.

However, Jesus lovingly rebuked her on this occasion – why? Because she had miss-understood the meaning of worship. She had miss-understood the meaning of love. We need to learn that love is usually spelt T.I.M.E.

How often today people are so pre-occupied with work (and trying to make money) that their relationships suffer – be it the relationship with their spouse, their relationship with their children, their relationship with friends and their relationship with God.

At the end of their life the cry goes up – not, *“Oh I wish I had worked longer hours and harder”* but a cry of longing, *“Oh I wish I had spent more time with my spouse, my kids, my grand-kids and my friends.”* Life is more about relationships than money or achievements, and the sad thing is that relationships take more work and time to build than money or achievements.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 1 continued: Mary of Bethany – Sat At Jesus’ Feet

Most academic achievements can be secured in under 7 years; many people have made \$1m in a similar timescale, but relationships develop over a lifetime. Most children live at home for the first 15 years or so of their life but if we don’t invest our time in them, when they leave all we are left with is a gaping hole that nothing can fill.

We were created to enjoy a relationship with God our Creator. Nothing else will satisfy. Unless we experience a personal relationship with God we have missed the whole purpose of life, and all our hard work and acquisition of things will be in vain. The Bible calls a life like that ‘meaningless’.

Mary shows us the alternative. She sat at the feet of Jesus, learnt from Him and so lived the best life possible. God honours those who spend time with Him. (It’s also good preparation for Heaven – eternity – living eternally with God.)

Mary of Bethany would say to us today...

There is nothing more important in your diary today than for you to spend time with Jesus – reading His Word, the Bible, and in prayer – both talking and listening. Please don’t rush into your day without taking time to give Him the first and best part.

Prayer

Father, please teach me what is important to You. Please guard me from being sucked into this world’s mould. Help me to realise that as I seek Your face and Your wisdom and direction for my life so my way becomes clear and I feel fulfilled. Please protect me from thinking that spending time with You is wasted time. For Your Name’s sake, I ask it. Amen.

Additional readings

Psalm 1; Matthew 6:5-34; Psalm 119:9-16.

Questions

Why do we think we do not have enough time to spare some with Jesus first thing in the morning?

What are the advantages we receive from spending time with God?

How could you make it into a good habit?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2: Mary of Bethany – Knew Bereavement And Hope

Reading

John 11:1-46.

Knew Bereavement And Hope

Just because you are a Christian does not mean you will be exempt from the challenges and pain of life. We need to understand that our life is human whereas God is divine. We are mortal; God is eternally existent. We are finite; God is infinite.

When we become a Christian we receive forgiveness for all we have done wrong – our sin, independence and selfishness – and God gives us eternal life through the power of His Holy Spirit. Our bodies, nevertheless, remain human and mortal.

Sooner or later we will die; our bodies are subject to the normal processes of decay, and unless we receive miraculous protection or healing, we will suffer the physical illnesses that abound in the world.

Our salvation grants us a far better life on earth – free from the effects of sin and guilt, a sure hope for the future and an indescribable joy in the present. However, it does not make us immune from the tragedies of life.

Mary and Martha experienced such a tragedy when their brother, Lazarus, died.

They experienced the same emotional feelings we all do – Why should this happen to one of Jesus' friends? Why should it happen to us? Why would Jesus allow this to happen? Why didn't Jesus come as soon as we told him Lazarus was ill? Why didn't He come and heal him before he died? Didn't Jesus care? Doesn't He understand how we feel?

Here we are two single women and now our male protector, breadwinner and 'head of the house' has been snatched from us – what are we going to do?

Yes, death is final. *We won't see our brother again until the Great Resurrection takes place.*

Yes, Mary and Martha were distraught in the extreme. And all this happened whilst Jesus was still alive on earth.

Oh, the relief when He finally turned up. And yes, Mary and Martha let loose all their pent-up agony and disappointment on Him – after all He was the one who had let them down. He could have prevented all that from happening, and yet He wasn't there.

I love the fact that John records that both sisters said the same thing – *"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."* Was it an accusation or a deep cry of frustration and

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2 continued: Mary of Bethany – Knew Bereavement And Hope

disappointment? I don't know, possibly both. But it was also a tremendous statement of faith. *If You had been here – Lazarus would still be alive.* In other words, You have the authority over sickness and health and life and death. Wow, what amazing faith in the face of such a painful experience.

There follows one of the most poignant statements in Scripture – *Jesus wept.* Sure, Jesus wept. He felt their pain and loss. He had seen the results of our humanity. He had seen what effect mortality has on humans. He also witnessed first hand what The Fall had delivered to His friends.

God created us to live forever – but Satan, Adam and Eve had ruined all that, so consequently we are all under the sentence of decay and death. Oh, how that must have wounded Jesus – the Author of life – who knew what God's initial intentions were – life forever in harmony with God and His creation.

No doubt He also wept, knowing that He would have to pay the ultimate price to restore God's perfect order.

Mary of Bethany would say to us today...

It's not until we are in our deepest distress that we find Jesus is the total answer to all our real and deepest needs. He is the Author of both comfort and hope.

Prayer

Thank You, Father, for being there for us in the times of our deepest need. Sometimes we don't understand Your timing or Your ways – please help us, nevertheless, to trust You – that You know what You are doing, that Your way is always the best way and that Your timing is always perfect. Amen.

Additional readings

Joshua 1:1-9; 1 Kings 19:1-18; Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 22:39-43.

Questions

Why is it we seem to sense God more in life's deepest valley than when life is going well?

How can we encourage ourselves when God seems absent?

What do you need God to do for you today?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3: Mary of Bethany – Was Passionate About Her Relationship With Jesus As Her Lord

Reading

John 12:1-10.

Was Passionate About Her Relationship With Jesus As Her Lord

Mary reminds me of King David – two people who disregarded the opinions of others and let their devotion to God overflow in complete abandonment to Him.

David was so excited at the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem that he stripped off to dance with all his might. His wife sharply criticised him, but he retaliated that he would go to any extremes to worship his Lord.

Somehow Mary must have discerned that Jesus was nearing the end of His mission on earth. Before He left she wanted Him to know how much she loved Him. Nothing would be too much to 'spend' on Him. She saved up her nest egg and then spent it all in one reckless act of total extravagance. The perfume would have cost a year's wages. Surely a 'Signature' range item would have done just as well?

No, not for Mary. Maybe she remembered Cain and Abel. Cain gave some of his crop to sacrifice it to God whereas Abel brought the best from the firstborn of his flock. Cain ended up killing his brother through jealousy.

Maybe Mary remembered Esau. Although he was the firstborn son and had inherited all the blessings of that position, he didn't value them – he treated them as dirt. He sold them for a cup of stew.

No, Mary would not be like Cain or Esau. She would be more like Abel – she would save up to give Jesus her very best – everything she owned. Yes, she would also put some thought into it – she didn't give Jesus money – what would he do with that but give it away. Money meant nothing to Him.

No, she would buy the very best perfume as a sort of fragrant incense to worship her Lord. Did you notice – she had to get on her knees in order to anoint Jesus' feet?

Yes, she could not worship standing over Him; she must kneel down to pour the perfume over His feet. But wait, there is more. She wiped His feet with her hair. How would she do that – by lowering her head as low as she could in honour of her Master and King.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3 continued: Mary of Bethany – Was Passionate About Her Relationship With Jesus As Her Lord

So, not only was her gift extravagant but so was her body position. In total humility she wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. No wonder there was an outcry from Judas. He did not see Jesus as Mary did. He saw no reason to go overboard in wasting money on Him. The lowering of her body in extravagant worship was the last straw – who did she think Jesus was? Who did Jesus think He was to accept such a form of worship? This whole thing had got completely out of hand.

Worship has two main strands to it. 1) Worship for what God has done. He is the Author and Sustainer of life – our life and breath are in His hands. We worship Jesus for our salvation and eternal life. We worship Him for answered prayer and the many 'things' and miracles He does for us – and so we should.

However, there is another strand. 2) God is worthy of worship – for Who He is. Yes, just for Who He is. He is Almighty, Omnipotent – the Only True God, Creator of Heaven and Earth – the One before whom every knee must bow.

As Paul tells us – *Jesus has been given the Name, which is above all Names. That at the Name of Jesus, every knee shall bow in Heaven and on earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.*

The interesting thing is God has given us a choice – to do it now or later or to do it now and later. We each have to make that choice. Mary chose the latter option. I have too.

And you?

Mary of Bethany would say to us today...

Until you can worship Jesus just for who He is you will constantly be open to disappointment. He is not there just to meet your needs. He is there for you to love and serve wholeheartedly, in total abandonment – whether or not He does what you want Him to do.

Prayer

Father, when I consider what Mary did and look at my expressions of love to you they seem poles apart. I'm sorry for those times I take Your love and mercy for granted. Please help me develop a new love for You, which is fully expressive, and gives You pleasure. Amen.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3 continued: Mary of Bethany – Was Passionate About Her Relationship With Jesus As Her Lord

Additional readings

2 Samuel 6:12-23; Luke 7:36-50; Luke 17:11-19; Romans 12:1-2.

Questions

What are your love languages?

How do you show your devotion to Jesus Christ? How thankful are you?

Are you able to worship God just for who He is, as well as for what He has done and continues to do for you?