



Martha and Mary

Focus Verses: Luke 10:38-42, John 11:1-44

Martha and Mary are two sisters with two personalities and two stories in the Bible. It's interesting to study who chose to record their stories and learn more about the writer.

THE WRITER, LUKE

If you read the Gospels in the order they appear in the Bible, you first meet Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. Luke was a physician and Paul's friend. Biblical scholars date the book of Luke between 62 and 70 A.D., so it is unlikely that he was an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry. Luke wrote after carefully investigating the stories of those personally involved.

MARTHA SERVES, MARY LISTENS

The narrative in Luke 10:38-42 is only five verses long. Martha invited Jesus and His disciples into her home for rest and a meal. She was a doer. She saw a need and filled it. There was nothing inherently wrong with what she was doing. She may have been moderately wealthy, at least middle class, because the Bible implies she owned her own home, yet didn't seem to have any servants because, before too long, she was distracted as she served alone. She complains to Jesus, her guest, that her sister has left her to do all the work.

Life Reflection:

Have you ever felt that you were doing more than your fair share?

Have you ever complained to the Lord about someone else?

Have you ever wished you didn't have so much to do?

Mary was probably younger and lived with Martha. There was no indication that either of them was married. Mary was not a doer. While she likely helped occasionally, she did not seem to be called to serve like Martha.

Two sisters, two personalities.

Mary sat at Jesus' feet and heard His Word. Some might call Mary lazy because she sat while Martha served, but the Bible never says or implies that. Mary recognized the wonderful opportunity to be included in Jesus' congregation. Before Jesus came, women were often left out of such teachings. Jesus never excluded women.



Martha served; Mary listened. Sure, Martha could have served and listened; sometimes, that's possible, but she could not have paid full attention to both. She was distracted. Mary wisely chose to listen, but Martha had to learn to listen.

Martha had a problem with Mary's decision not to serve, and she handled the situation correctly. She went directly to Jesus. She could have communicated better, and her motives may have been suspect, but she ended up in the right place. Luke does not mention Martha raising her voice or talking behind Mary's back. Luke wrote that Martha came straight to Jesus, and He responded with love and compassion.

Jesus' response is noteworthy. Reading it centuries later, we can hear Jesus' love for Martha because He said her name twice to get her attention. Jesus immediately acknowledged her issue, reassuring her that He heard her and took her dilemma seriously. Jesus gently directs her to what is essential: His words. He told her that Mary had chosen the good part of what was going on that day.

Before we move on, pay attention to Mary and Martha's physical positions. Mary was at Jesus' feet, looking up at Him. Martha was probably standing at His side, bending slightly down to speak with a seated Jesus face-to-face.

Two sisters, two personalities.

Martha was near His head, looking Him in the eye. Notice He doesn't admonish her for taking a direct approach to Him or for asking for help. I can imagine her tone was not the nicest due to her frustration with her sister.

He allows us to be emotional with Him without fear.

Martha and Mary pg. 2 | MoreToLifeToday.com | © 2024



Jesus reminded Martha that there was a time for everything. In a nod to Ecclesiastes 3, there is a time to serve and a time to be served. That day was a time to be served by the Master.

Life Reflection:

Have you heard your Father's loving voice?

Has God ever reminded you of something you already knew?

Did it comfort you when you needed it?

THE WRITER, JOHN

The second time we encounter Martha and Mary is in John.

Several Johns are mentioned in the New Testament. While there are ongoing discussions about which John wrote this book, most Biblical scholars attribute it to John, the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples Jesus called in His lifetime. So, his account is first-hand knowledge, even though it is believed he wrote it near the end of his life.

MARTHA, MARY, AND THEIR BROTHER'S DEATH

The story of Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, which John records, is probably the most well-known. The only other time the sisters are mentioned together in Scripture is in John 11:1-44. Lazarus was sick, so the sister sent a message to Jesus.

John tells us that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Jesus loves everyone, of course, but the fact that John thought it important enough to state it explicitly means that Jesus must have been a very good family friend.

John notes that Lazarus is sick, and then Jesus does something strange. He delays the trip to Bethany until



Lazarus dies. Some friend, huh? He healed strangers but let His friend die.

Jesus and His entourage finally arrived to find Lazarus dead and buried for four days. And remember, they didn't have the embalming process we do today.

When Martha, a woman of action, heard Jesus coming, she left the house full of mourners to meet Him while Mary stayed home.

Two sisters, two personalities.

Once again, Martha met Jesus face-to-face and eye-to-eye, and this time, she said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (verse 21). It sounds bold and harsh until you read her following statement, "But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You" (John 11:22, ESV). Her implications are clear. She wants Him to do the sisters a favor and fix the situation.



Martha and Jesus talk more. "Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (John 11:23-27, ESV).

Martha then calls Mary to come, and she comes quickly and meets Jesus in the same place Martha did. Evidently, He waited for her. When Mary gets to Jesus, she drops to her knees (in the same position she was in Luke's story) and says the same thing Martha did: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32). Mary says nothing more.

Life Reflection:

Have you asked God questions?

Are there times when you can't see His entire plan?

Was trusting God the only option you had?

At this point, Jesus is clearly dismayed. If John knew the exact reason, he wouldn't share it. John 11:33 records, "He groaned in the spirit and was troubled." In verse 35, "Jesus wept."

Jesus commands that the stone at Lazarus's grave be rolled away amid protests from the ever-practical Martha. She even tells Jesus that her brother stinks by now. Jesus reminds her of their earlier exchange while others move the stone away. Jesus prays and calls Lazarus to come forth, and he does.

Two Sisters, Two Personalities, Two Stories, One Lesson

Some people will look at the surface of these two stories about two sisters and conclude that Mary was the "better, more spiritual" sister, so it's better to be a "Mary." Perhaps Mary made the correct choice in that brief moment at the house in Luke 10. But I believe we can learn more from these sisters beyond what Jesus said to Martha, "But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." As far as a proclamation in the Bible goes, it is one of the best.

However, no person's existence and purpose should be boiled down to one moment. Even after the lesson she learned in her home with Jesus, Martha remained analytical and contemplative. Mary continued to be emotional and demonstrative. Their personalities didn't change, although Martha likely learned that there is always room for improvement. Our inherent personalities don't change because that's how God created us. However, it should never be an excuse not to improve, grow, and try to be the best we can be.

Life Reflection:

Have you failed and been judged for that one moment?

Have you judged someone else?

Do you have a "Martha" or "Mary" personality?

If you are more “Martha” than “Mary,” consider this:

Don’t fret about the “Marys”; God has not called them to serve as you do.

Recognize that sometimes it is more important to be served than to serve, especially when the Master is present.

If you are more “Mary” than “Martha,” consider this:

Even if it isn’t your calling, sometimes “Marthas” need your help. This is because the sooner a task is done, the sooner the “Marthas” can sit and give their full attention to Jesus.

Just because the “Marthas” aren’t with you at Jesus’ feet doesn’t mean they aren’t with Him. They might meet Him face-to-face.

Maybe we can learn from each other. We are two sisters with two personalities, and we can create an objective that works for us both. We could call her “Marytha” just for fun!

When Jesus is your Savior, you should come to church as “Mary,” who intends to worship the Lord, or “Martha,” who wants to serve the Lord. You should never be “Lazarus,” who has no intention and waits for the Lord to bring him to life!

It doesn’t matter if you go to Jesus weeping at His feet, speak to Him face-to-face, or come to Him walking out of your grave; go to Him and know that He is the resurrection and the life! “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25).

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