

## *Lesson Ten*

# **LUKE 10:38–42; JOHN 11; JOHN 12:1–11**

## **Mary of Bethany: Always at His Feet**

Three times the Gospels show us Mary of Bethany. Three times she is in the same posture. Sitting at His feet to listen. Falling at His feet to weep. Kneeling at His feet to worship. While her sister Martha bustles in the kitchen, and her brother Lazarus comes and goes, Mary is found, over and over again, in the one place that matters most. She is as close to Jesus as the geometry of a room will allow.

She is the woman who chooses "the good portion." She is the woman whose tears wring tears out of Jesus Himself. She is the woman whose perfume Jesus will say is being prepared on Him for burial, a sentence none of the men in the room have yet understood. She does not preach. She does not travel. She does not write a Gospel. She mostly sits, weeps, and worships. And Jesus stops the room three different times to defend her.

Mary's story is for every woman who feels like she does not do enough. For every woman who is told that her sitting is wasting time, her weeping is making people uncomfortable, her devotion is extravagant. Read Luke 10:38 to 42, John 11, and John 12:1 to 11 carefully this week. Mary is going to teach us that the most important thing we can do for Jesus is to be near Him.

### **First impressions**

Bethany was a small village about two miles east of Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus appear together in the Gospels as a family of disciples who hosted Jesus on multiple occasions. Whatever their financial situation, their home was clearly a refuge for Jesus in the last months of His earthly ministry. To love and support the Lord's work in our own homes and with our own resources is no small thing. The Bethany family has been remembered for two thousand years because they did exactly that.

1.
  - a. Read Luke 10:38 to 42, John 11, and John 12:1 to 11. What is your first impression of Mary of Bethany?
  - b. What does she have in common in all three scenes?

### **At His feet to learn (Luke 10:38–42)**

In first-century Jewish culture, to sit at the feet of a rabbi was the formal posture of a disciple in training. Paul describes his own rabbinical education that way (Acts 22:3, "educated at the feet of Gamaliel"). The posture was usually reserved for men, since formal rabbinical training was for men. When Mary sits at Jesus' feet in Luke 10:39, she takes the place of a serious student of the Word. Jesus does not send her back to the kitchen.

2.
  - a. Read Luke 10:38 to 42. Where is Martha, and where is Mary?
  - b. What is Jesus quietly affirming about Mary by allowing her this posture?
3.
  - a. Read 10:40. What is bothering Martha?
  - b. Notice that Martha doesn't bring her concern to Mary directly. She brings it to Jesus, as a complaint about Mary. What does this teach us about how anxiety affects our relationships?

**For Thought and Discussion:** Many of us are more like Martha than Mary. We measure our spiritual life by how much we do, not by how much we are with Jesus. Where do you see Martha tendencies in yourself? In the Christian women around you?

4.
  - a. Read 10:41 to 42. How does Jesus answer Martha?
  - b. What does He say is "necessary" and "good"?
  - c. Why does Jesus refuse to redirect Mary back into the kitchen?

**Study Skill, Following a Word or Phrase Through Scripture:** When Jesus says "one thing is necessary" (Luke 10:42), He is using a phrase that echoes in surprising places. David writes, "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after" (Psalm 27:4). Paul says, "One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind" (Philippians 3:13). Jesus says to the rich young ruler, "One thing you lack" (Mark 10:21). When a phrase repeats through Scripture, it is worth tracing. A good concordance or even a search in your Bible software will surface the parallels. Reading them together often deepens the meaning of any one of them.

**Optional Application:** Block out a single, undistracted hour this week, not for Bible study, not for preparing a lesson, not for praying through a list, but just to be with Jesus in His word. Read slowly. Listen. Tell Him you are there. Write down what you sense.

## **At His feet to grieve (John 11:1–44)**

5.
  - a. Read John 11:1 to 6. Lazarus is sick. What do the sisters do? What does Jesus do?
  - b. Read 11:5 and 11:6 right next to each other. Notice the strange word "so": "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." What does this teach us about how God's love sometimes looks like delay?
6.
  - a. Read 11:17 to 27. When Jesus arrives, who runs out to meet Him first? What does she say?
  - b. What is Jesus' famous reply to Martha (11:25 to 26)? What truth is He revealing to her?
7.
  - a. Read 11:28 to 32. When Mary finally goes out to Him, where does she end up? What are her first words?
  - b. Compare her words to Martha's in 11:21. They are identical. What is different about how each woman expresses the same grief?

The Greek word translated "deeply moved" in John 11:33 (and again in 11:38) is unusually strong. In other Greek writings it described the snort of a horse or the indignation of a person stirred to action. Jesus is not just sad. He is angry, in the right way, at the wreckage death has made of His friends. Death was never God's design (Genesis 1:31; Romans 5:12). It is an enemy, and the Son of God stands before it and weeps because He hates it. He will defeat it before this chapter is over, and again, definitively, on a Sunday morning a few weeks later (1 Corinthians 15:54 to 57).

8.
  - a. Read 11:33 to 35. What does the text say Jesus does when He sees Mary weeping?

b. John 11:35 ("Jesus wept") is the shortest verse in the Bible and one of the most important. What does it tell us about the Son of God? About His response to your grief?

c. Notice that Jesus weeps even though He knows Lazarus is about to walk out of the tomb. Why does He still weep?

**For Thought and Discussion:** Christians sometimes pressure each other to skip grief and "get to the resurrection." Jesus did not. What does John 11 say to Christians who are still in the middle of a long grief?

9. Read 11:38 to 44. What does Jesus do? What does the resurrection of Lazarus prove about who He is?

## At His feet to worship (John 12:1–11)

Pure nard was an imported, expensive perfume made from a plant grown in the Himalayas. Judas estimates the value of Mary's jar at three hundred denarii (12:5), which was nearly a year's wages for a common laborer. In many households, an alabaster flask of perfume like this was a family treasure, perhaps a dowry, perhaps an inheritance, often saved for one's own burial. Mary takes everything she has and pours it out on Jesus, six days before His own burial. The Lord will later say that wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her (Mark 14:9).

**Study Skill, Harmonizing Parallel Gospel Accounts Carefully:** Three of the four Gospels record an anointing of Jesus. Matthew 26:6 to 13, Mark 14:3 to 9, and John 12:1 to 8 appear to describe the same event in Bethany during Passion Week. Luke 7:36 to 50 (next week's lesson) describes a separate event, much earlier in Jesus' ministry, at a Pharisee's house in Galilee, involving a different woman ("a sinner" rather than Mary of Bethany). When studying parallel passages, compare them carefully. Note what is the same and what is different. Distinct events with similar shapes appear more than once in the Gospels (Jesus feeds five thousand and four thousand; cleanses the temple early and late; sends out the twelve and the seventy). Letting each account speak for itself is the safest path to right interpretation.

10. a. Read John 12:1 to 3. The setting is a dinner six days before Passover, six days before Jesus' own death. Who is at the table?

b. What does Mary do? Estimate the value of the perfume (see 12:5: "three hundred denarii," about a year's wages).

11. Notice the details: she breaks the jar, she pours it on His feet, she wipes His feet with her hair. In that culture, what would each of these acts have meant?
12. a. Read Judas's objection in 12:4 to 6. What does he say? What is really going on under the surface?
- b. Why is it dangerous when we criticize someone else's worship?
13. a. Read Jesus' defense of Mary in 12:7 to 8. What does He say she is doing without quite realizing it?
- b. Matthew 26:13 records Jesus saying that wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, Mary's act will be told in memory of her. What does this tell us about the value Jesus places on extravagant, lavish, costly devotion?

**For Thought and Discussion:** Mary's perfume was probably her life savings, perhaps her dowry, perhaps an inheritance. She poured it all out on Jesus. Where in your life is God inviting extravagance? Where are you more inclined to calculate the cost?

## What Mary teaches us

14. a. All three scenes have Mary at the same place: at Jesus' feet. What does this say about the shape of a devoted life?
- b. Which of the three Marys are you most often, the listening, the weeping, or the worshiping? Which do you find hardest?
15. Jesus defends Mary three separate times in the Gospels: against Martha, against the mourners, and against Judas. Each time, He sides with her devotion. What does this tell us about how Jesus sees the kind of woman who simply wants to be with Him?

**Optional Application:** If you knew Jesus would be in your home this Friday evening, what would you change about your week to prepare? Pick one thing you would actually do, and do it.

## Your response

16.
  - a. Where in your life are you currently more like Martha than Mary? What would it look like, this week, to sit at His feet instead?
  - b. What are you afraid will fall apart if you stop?
17. Where in your life are you grieving? What does the Jesus who wept with Mary at the tomb of Lazarus say to that grief?
18. Where in your life is God inviting extravagant worship, something costly, something the watching world might criticize as wasteful?
19. Write one sentence summarizing what you most want to take away from Mary's story, and one concrete step you will take in light of it.

## For the group

**Warm-up.** Begin by asking each woman to share whether she is by temperament more like Martha or more like Mary, and what is one strength and one struggle of being that way.

**Discussion.** These three scenes cover a lot of emotional ground: anxiety, grief, and worship. Pay particular attention to questions 4 (the one thing necessary), 8 (Jesus wept), 10 to 11 (the cost of the perfume), and 16 (what would it look like to sit). Be gentle with women who are currently grieving. Mary's tears are part of why Jesus is precious to us.

**Wrap-up.** Close by reading John 12:1 to 3 aloud and praying that each woman in your group would, this week, return to a place at the Lord's feet, listening, weeping, or worshiping, as she most needs.