

Faith Nurtured by “Sitting at Jesus’ Feet”



Despite the many miracles Jesus performed in the land of Israel and His authoritative teachings on the kingdom of heaven, Jesus’ public ministry was up against a backdrop of wide unbelief and rejection by the vast majority of Jewish society. Remember how Jesus upbraided “the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because

they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matthew 11:20-21)! This unbelieving stance was also evident when, after Jesus’ “bread of life” discourse, many balked at His doctrine and “from that

time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (John 6:66). The problem was, the majority of the Jews were anticipating a mighty military deliverer, not realising that the first and utmost deliverance which they sorely needed was that from their sins! As such, they rejected Jesus as Israel’s promised Messiah.

However, that is not to say that there were no Jewish believers. In fact, some of the most devout followers were Jewish. Besides the eleven disciples, several holy women who were closely associated with Jesus, come readily to mind. Mary of Bethany was one such woman. Hers was a common Jewish name, so to differentiate her from the other “Marys” in the New Testament, the gospel-writers consistently associate her with Bethany, her town of residence, which “was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off (i.e. about two miles away, as one furlong is approximately one-eighth of a mile)” (John 11:18). Hence, Bible-readers have come to refer to her as “Mary of Bethany”.

Jesus’ Welcome Stopover at Bethany

In the Bible, Mary’s name is always mentioned alongside Martha, her sister. From the account in John 11, she also had a brother named Lazarus, and from the order in which their names are listed together (cf. John 11:5), we gather that Martha was Mary’s elder sister and Lazarus her younger brother. Together, they were a well-loved family of the Lord who, it is not unreasonable to infer, must have stopped over and received great

hospitality at their home in Bethany each time His ministry brought Him to Jerusalem in Judaea.

Actually, this was the case the first time the Bible (in Jesus’ ministry) mentions Mary of Bethany in Luke 10. In Luke 9:51, we read that “when the time was come that (Jesus) should be received up (i.e. referring to His ascension), he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem”. After the journey through Samaria (Luke 9:52-56) and the evangelistic mission of the seventy (Luke 10:1-24), “it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary” (Luke 10:38-39a). Now, the familiarity with which Jesus was hospitably welcomed would indicate that this was not the first time He came under their roof in Bethany.

Though Jesus spent the greater part of His early ministry in Galilee (for He only embarked on an intense, concentrated ministry in Judaea towards the end of His public ministry, nearing the time of His crucifixion), He nonetheless went to Jerusalem at least once a year for the Passover feast. Jesus’ short public ministry began when He was “about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23a) and lasted slightly more than three years, covering four Passovers. The first was soon after His first miracle at Cana (John 2:11-13), followed by the second (John 5:1) at 31 years of age, then the third (John 6:4) at 32 years old, and finally the fourth and last Passover (John 12:1) at the age of 33. Apparently, Mary’s family had heard and embraced Jesus’

teachings early in His ministry, and made it a point to extend their warm hospitality whenever He was in their vicinity. Jesus certainly was made to feel welcome in their home. No wonder Scripture tells us that “Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus” (John 11:5).

Mary’s Well-Chosen “Good Part”

In any case, the first time the Bible depicts Mary in the presence of Jesus at her home, she was found sitting at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39), which probably must have been the case each time. This indicates her desire to stay in Jesus’ presence to hear His words with rapt attention in order to learn of the great truths concerning the kingdom of heaven. She considered this privilege of settling herself peacefully at Jesus’ feet and becoming engrossed in His words as her most treasured moments and memories in life. She counted this to be more important than all her chores the moment Jesus came into her house on those infrequent occasions.

Such worshipful, learning moments did not come by readily and she would not know when Jesus would come visiting again in the midst of His busy public ministry. As such, she chose to put aside all else and give her undivided time to the “good part” of hearing Jesus speak, which to her was most excellent and indispensable. She refused to be preoccupied with much serving to the extent of becoming “cumbered” (i.e. distracted and bogged down), “careful” (i.e. anxious and worried), “troubled” (i.e. agitated

and disturbed in the mind) – which was exactly what happened to her harried, “stressed-out” sister (cf. Luke 10:40-41)!

In murmuring against Mary for listening to Jesus at the expense of helping her prepare a meal for the guests, Martha had apparently relegated the most “needful” thing to second place. For that, Jesus mildly rebuked her for her misguided priorities but commended Mary for making the right choice to her eternal benefit, “which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42b). Many of Mary’s possessions, acquaintances and earthly things that she enjoyed may be removed from her in the face of trials and tribulations, but nothing can take away her most holy faith, built up through the knowledge of God’s Word. That is her ultimate comfort and only protection (especially in the worst of times), hence Mary’s well-chosen “good part”!

Mary’s Keen Perception of Christ’s Impending Death

Mary having chosen the “good part” had enabled her to have a profound understanding of spiritual truths. This stood her in good stead when it comes to a keen discernment of divine truths. Evidently, her quiet and deep contemplation of Jesus’ teachings gave her the ability to understand the heart of Christ – apparently more than her sister, and perhaps even better than any of the twelve disciples! Mary’s spiritual enlightenment was astonishingly demonstrated by her keen perception of Jesus’ teachings and predictions of His death, and

thereby of His true intent / purpose of His first coming on earth.

In truth, Jesus had on several occasions shared unequivocally with His disciples regarding His impending death and subsequent resurrection (cf. Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:1-2). But His disciples “understood not this saying, and ... perceived it not” (Luke 9:45). No doubt they would have tried to clarify with Him when they were alone with Him during His many teaching sessions with them. It is not unreasonable to think that several of such sessions would have taken place in Mary’s home, where she would be found sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening intently to many thought-provoking doctrines, including Jesus’ impending death.

Furthermore, Scripture tells us that prior to His arrival at Bethany for the last time, while they were on the way towards Jerusalem, Jesus had specifically told His disciples that “all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished” (Luke 18:31). Needless to say, Mary would have heard (from Jesus at her home meetings) and pondered deeply over these “written things”, namely the Old Testament prophecies, including Isaiah 53:4, 5, 7, 10 – “Surely he hath borne our griefs, ... he was bruised for our iniquities: ... he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter ... Yet it pleased the LORD to ... make his soul an offering for sin”.

Mary seemed to perceive Jesus’ true intent better than most around her. This was not by accident. It had been properly and carefully cultivated through attentive listening

and meditation of Christ’s words. It was the result of her willingness to sit still and listen. A crucial point of note can be drawn here: While everybody is bustling about making preparations for and seeing to the logistics of the meeting (important though they are), only those who truly desire to listen intently to the Word of God preached will end up being spiritually enlightened, thereby growing “in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) – “which shall not be taken away”.

Mary’s Far-Reaching “Memorial”

Mary had taken seriously Jesus’ public declarations that He had come to lay down His life for His people. She realised how precious Jesus’ “fleshly” body was. It was a perfect body – soon to be sacrificed. The sinless “Sin-bearer” for her nation Israel (nay, for all mankind) was readying Himself for that ultimate “hour” (of His atoning death) for which He had come. In fact, while in Bethany, Jesus revealed that “after two days is the feast of the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified” (Matthew 26:2). While the disciples were “slow of heart to believe” (Luke 24:25), Mary purposed in her heart to express her grateful appreciation of Christ’s impending sacrifice.

Mary seemed to have grasped “the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh” (1 Timothy 3:16)! Christ’s taking on a human body had paved the way for Him to obey all the righteous demands of

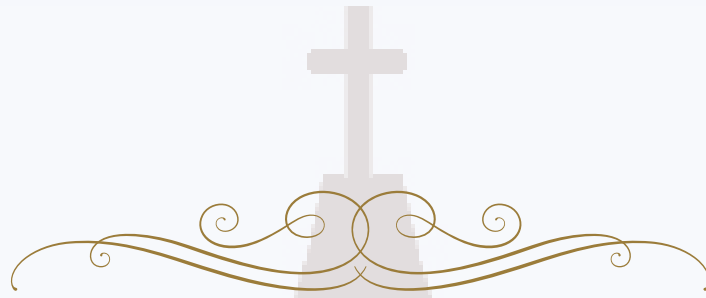
the Law on man's behalf and then to suffer its death penalty as the ransom that would satisfy God's justice. She, perhaps more than others, understood and was utterly moved by this. How it would all come to pass was perhaps not totally clear to her – but the horror of it all would soon unfold before her sad eyes!

That is why Jesus' body was so precious to her that she gave of her best. She did what she could; she anointed Him with the very costly ointment of spikenard (cf. Mark 14:3). She wanted to "come aforehand to anoint (His) body to the burying" (Mark 14:8b). To her, this gesture was the highest form of appreciation she could express for her beloved Saviour ahead of His heart-wrenching ordeal [a "cup" which "if it be possible, (be) let ... (to) pass from me" (Matthew 26:39)]. It was "a good work" that she had wrought (Mark 14:6b) – a most outstanding, astounding work of faith! Jesus said "against the day of my burying hath she kept this (ointment)" (John 12:7b). Mary did not stint from giving of her most precious

possession [which could easily have cost more than 300 pence (cf. Mark 14:5), equivalent to a year's wages!]. As it turned out, that was what Christ needed most – an affirmation of His Father's will for Him that He should die for sinners (cf. Romans 5:8) – and He duly commended her publicly.

In honour of what Mary had done, the remembrance of her act of faith and devotion was preserved by Scripture (cf. Mark 14:9). Because she understood the real message of the Gospel, so wherever the Gospel is preached, she would also be remembered by Bible-readers throughout the church age. She did what she could within her means in the light of her deep spiritual understanding. In our limited capacity to serve the Lord, we should likewise do what we can – not what we wish we could but have no means to. And in so doing, may we leave behind a spiritual fragrance that lingers on in others' memory – much like Mary's far-reaching "memorial", which speaks of her perceptive faith, no doubt cultivated and nurtured through hours of "sitting at Jesus' feet"!

Evidently, her quiet and deep contemplation of Jesus' teachings gave her the ability to understand the heart of Christ - apparently more than her sister, and perhaps even better than any of the twelve disciples! Mary's spiritual enlightenment was astonishingly demonstrated by her keen perception of Jesus' teachings and predictions of His death, and thereby of His true intent / purpose of His first coming on earth.



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2 Corinthians 9:7

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