

THE WHY AND HOW OF PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

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Lesson 11

REVIEW: One of the most versatile types of Bible study is TOPICAL BIBLE STUDY. Topical study widens our horizon concerning our understanding of each particular topic chosen. Two factors in favor of topical Bible study are (1) its short-term nature (each lesson may be independent of either supportive or follow-up study); (2) it caters to our own personal need or interest. What are the logical steps we must take in topical Bible study? (Selection of topic, objective, establishment of a working vocabulary, examination of biblical facts, statements or principles relating to the chosen topic, conclusions and application.)

OUTLINE:

CHARACTER STUDY (Only those portions of the text which concern both Martha and Mary are brought into focus in this lesson.)

I. KNOWN FACTS

- A. Background
- B. Events
- C. Attitudes
- D. Actions
- E. Characteristics
 - 1. Strengths
 - 2. Weaknesses
 - 3. Needs
 - 4. Divine provisions

II. PERSONAL APPLICATION

APPROACH:

While topical Bible study offers almost unlimited possibilities and directions, CHARACTER STUDIES are by **far the most popular and interesting**. Here, too, the principle applies that "**All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable** for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect (mature), thoroughly furnished **unto all good works.**" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). In topical studies we come to know a subject; in character studies, a person.

Before we undertake our study, let us be sure that we look at the character(s) we are about to examine **sensibly, objectively** and **impartially**. Those men and women,

whom the Holy Spirit chose to record in Scripture are not there by happenstance; they were written up intentionally, indelibly, as object lessons for our learning. (See **Romans 15:4**.) Some stand as beacons, pointing to a life of greatness. Such is the case of the "great cloud of witnesses" mentioned in Hebrews 11's "Who's Who in Scripture." Others remain as grave warnings (Lot's wife; the Exodus generation). Heroes or villains, these were real life people! They had feelings and problems; blessings and trials; weaknesses and strengths! They won victories and suffered defeat; they are gone, yet they left their mark in the pages of God's Word. They have a vital message for all who will take time to listen!

As we go into our study you will find it difficult not to identify with one or the other of the characters we will examine; but please remember that **NO ONE FITS INTO ANOTHER'S MOLD!** You may have similar traits, a kindred personality. Yet, **YOU ARE AN INDIVIDUAL!** GOD DOES NOT SPECIALIZE IN MASS PRODUCTION OF PEOPLE; YOU ARE AN ORIGINAL, and there is no one exactly like you! True, you should pattern your life after biblical principles! By prayer and obedience to the known will of God, allow the Holy Spirit to deal with the less desirable traits in your character. Listen and watch for the lessons you may learn, the mistakes you should avoid!

CHARACTER STUDY

Character study may involve **one or more than one individual**. When more than one person becomes the subject of study, you would want to **compare** them. Draw up a chart with two or more than two main columns, one for each character. List your observations and references. Remember to keep your statements as brief as possible.

I. KNOWN FACTS

A. Background. Never jump into Bible study as you would into a pool of water. Find out where you are going, familiarize yourself with the setting; that is, **ESTABLISH A BACKGROUND FOR YOUR FIGURES**. The two characters we will study are MARTHA and MARY. **APPROACH THEM AS IF YOU HAD NEVER HEARD OF THEM**. Who are they?

Reach for **your study helps, a Bible dictionary or a concordance**. The Bible dictionary will be of greater help to you in this type of study, but the concordance will do. Be sure that you **identify your characters correctly**. Our MARTHA will be easy to locate; there is only one mentioned. MARY is another matter; there are many Marys. Ours is MARY, THE SISTER OF LAZARUS. Read what it says about these persons. Jot down the references given and a key phrase to pinpoint them. **What you have by now is a thumbnail sketch**. From here on out you are on your own. **USE YOUR PRESENT FINDINGS AS A BASIS FOR YOUR OWN STUDY**, and allow the Holy Spirit to show you the details He recorded in Scripture. (If desired, check commentaries for additional information, perhaps such as regards life in the times when the Bible was written.)

Let us first **establish Martha and Mary's background**. What is their relationship? Do they have families? Are they believers? Where do they live? To do so, we have to familiarize ourselves with every passage in which the two are mentioned. Ours are **Luke 10; John 11 and John 12**. Head your chart with the names of the characters and the biblical references. Now begin to explore!

We know nothing about the early years of the two ladies, only what names they were given at birth. **The giving of names was very important in antiquity**. Usually it attended circumstances at birth, or a name was given the infant, and it was hoped the person would live up to its meaning. The name **MARTHA** is the Greek form of the Aramaic מרתא, מרתא. It means "lady, mistress." **MARY** is derived from the Hebrew "Miriam" or the Greek Μαρία (Maria). It means "bitter, obstinacy, rebellion." Less flattering, it was a popular name, and may have been the name of another family member. (***Examples:** "Ichabod"; 1 Sam. 4:21; "John"; John 1:13, 59, 60; "Noah"; Gen.5:29.)

As the older sister, Martha is introduced to us first (Luke 10:38). Note that Luke does not name their place of residence, but John does. They live in Bethany, a village on the eastern slope of Mount Olivet, about two miles away from Jerusalem (John 11:1, 18). John adds that Martha and Mary have a brother, Lazarus (John 11:1), and that the three of them live in Martha's house (Luke 10:38). Their family relationship established, we note their closeness to the Lord Jesus Christ, Who was a frequent and warmly welcomed Visitor at their home (John 11:5). They loved Him, and He loved them. Let us see them in a real-life situation.

B. Events. Two major events involving Martha and Mary are **recorded in Scripture**. One concerns a MAJOR CRISIS, the other, a MINOR INCIDENT. We read **about the first in John 11: 1-46**, about **the second, in John 12:1-8 and in Luke 10:38-42**.

COMMENTARY: John 11:1 states the crisis the two sisters are facing: their brother Lazarus (name, an abbreviated form of the Hebrew "Eliezer"--God is my help) is seriously ill and gradually losing his strength. The sisters are introduced, and Mary is identified as "Mary of Bethany" in contrast to the other Marys. She is not to be confused with Mary Magdalene (v.2) (Mary of Magdala, Luke 7:37; 8:2; Matt. 28:5; John 20:11-18, etc.) If ever they needed the Lord, it was now! Hence, they dispatched an urgent message to the Lord-- **S.O. L.** (Save our Lazarus; v. 3). Jesus is at the place of His baptism (John 10:40). The time of His going to the cross is rapidly approaching, and He had returned to the location where He had publicly identified Himself with the Father's plan for His coming to earth. The vocative, "Lord", indicates that Martha and Mary recognize the Savior's deity.

The fact that **Jesus delayed** His coming does not signify indifference (v.4). **WHEN GOD DELAYS AN ANSWER TO PRAYER IT IS IN OUR BEST INTEREST!** The principle of **John 13:7** is found in verses 5-7. **Verses 8-15** present **two misunderstandings** and **their clarification**. Is the Lord reckless, a Glutton for punishment, going where His

life is threatened (v. 8)? No, He goes because there exists an urgent need for FAITH IN CHRIST (vs. 9, 10; missionary emphasis)! **The question of SLEEP versus DEATH** (vs.11-14) demands a reason for the delay and the intent of the miracle about to be performed (v. 15). Note over-reaction on the part of Thomas, the Twin (v.16); we met him in John 21:2. (Better known as "Doubting Thomas," he would make an excellent character study.)

Next, we see **the conditions Jesus found upon His arrival**--Lazarus had been dead and buried for the past four days (v. 17). Verse 18, parenthetical. The presence of their many Jewish friends shows Martha and Mary's popularity (v.19).

C. Attitudes. D. Actions. From this point on notice the striking dissimilarities of two sisters. How can two members of the same family be so different? Apparently, they have the same parents! Do genes, heredity and background really determine how we shall turn out? Are we poured into a mold at birth, from which we cannot escape? Let us discover what God has to say on this subject!

The sacred writings give us a clearly defined character sketch of Martha and Mary. We are told their actions; we are shown their attitudes and feelings. One emerges as an energetic, practical and determined woman (Martha); the other as a melancholic, tender but brooding woman (Mary). Notice, **MARTHA ACTS**. (Read v. 20a.) She immediately ACTS (went and met Jesus); **MARY SITS**, lost in her grief. Doubtless she had heard the same news, but she does nothing about it.

Verses 21-32 record **portions of conversation** between the Lord and Martha, and the Lord and Mary. Both sisters reproach the Lord in the same manner: "Where were You when we needed You?" (See vs. 21, 32.) In Martha we detect impatience--"You are here, but You are too late to keep Lazarus from dying." In Mary we sense bitter disappointment. Her words are more of a complaint. Why do I say this? Notice Martha's conviction that the Lord can still perform a miracle (v.22). Mary says nothing of that sort, even though she falls at His feet in reverence (v.32).

Compare how the Lord deals with the sisters. He reasons with Martha on her doctrinal stand (vs. 23-27). She must not confuse the miracle He would perform with the resurrection of the dead at His coming again. She must distinguish between technical and personal knowledge (vs. 25, 26). Mary's case was different; anything He might say to tearful Mary at this moment would be useless. (When you reach a certain stage of weeping, you cannot stop yourself. You are so preoccupied with sorrow that you are oblivious to all else.) **The Lord simply ignores Mary's criticism**, but He is indignant inwardly; He groans and is troubled (v.33, 38). **NOTE THAT MARTHA DOES NOT HANG AROUND LONG:** "she went her way, and called Mary" as soon as the talk was over (v.28). In verse 39 **she protests in horror at the thought of a decomposing, bloated body emerging from the tomb**. Beloved brother or not, the exhuming of a body is not a pretty prospect! [Jewish burial customs called for prompt burial of the dead because of climatic conditions.

Usually, the body was washed and prepared for burial. It was tightly wrapped in cloth and laid in a grave or a tomb. The wealthy used aromatic spices in an attempt to preserve the dead as long as possible, with the resurrection in view.]

What had happened to Martha's proclaimed faith? Did she suddenly have misgivings about the Lord? I think not! Rather, she must have thought that He would go about it in a different way. (Others before her had misconceptions regarding the Lord's working; i.e. Abraham, Heb. 11:17-19; Naaman, 2 Kgs. 5:11.) **Mary's reaction is not even mentioned.** Apparently, she was still sobbing.

The raising of Lazarus, and the subsequent conversion of many eyewitnesses to the miracle (vs. 41-45) certainly called for a celebration. A supper was given in honor of the Lord and one of the main attractions at that feast was Lazarus. It appears from Mark 14:3 that the supper was at the home of Simon the leper. The date was six days before the Lord's last Passover on the earth (John 12:1, 2a). Hold your place in John 12, and turn to Luke 10:38-42.

NOTICE CAREFULLY THE WORDING OF LUKE. FOR JOHN ONLY MENTIONS THE INCIDENT IN PASSING (John 12:2). Of similar nature as Mary, John was thinking of other things, namely, Mary's anointing of the Lord's feet (vs. 3-8). **Note verse 39, and compare it to verse 38!** MARTHA IS SHOWN AS THE BUSY HOSTESS, MARY HELPS SOME, BUT SHE **ALSO** SAT AND HEARD HIS (the Lord's) WORD! The content of this passage implies that Mary helped Martha in the household duties but hung on everything the Lord said. As soon as she could, she would dart out of the kitchen to sit at His feet. That would leave Martha with the dishes!!! Or it would leave her with last-minute preparations and the actual serving of the meal.

The latter was the case in Luke 10:40: "Martha was cumbered about much serving..." CUMBERED (passive) is the Greek verb περισπάω, PERISPAO; "to be distracted, over-busy." Annoyed about Mary, she FEELS SLIGHTED and demands that He order Mary to help her. But lest we harshly condemn her, put yourself in Martha's place. The Lord Himself is the Guest of honor in your home. Would you not plan a most elaborate dinner? You'd want everything to run smoothly, and certainly you would want to enjoy your Guest too, instead of waiting on your other guests constantly running back and forth for refills and the various courses. You would expect help from the female members of the household. Instead, you find yourself waiting on them as well! How would you react? Don't you get flustered as you try to change from harried housewife to gracious hostess? Wouldn't your patience snap?

MARTHA SERVES WHILE MARY SITS!

Notice that the Lord does not deal harshly with Martha. He simply tells her that she allows herself to become distracted and gets into a tizzy over the details of life, over the cares of life. His statement, "**but one thing is needful**" (v. 42) has a double meaning. It refers to **spiritual** as well as to **physical** sustenance, **PRIORITIES are the important issue here.** YOU CAN LOSE SIGHT OF FELLOWSHIP WITH CHRIST

OVER SERVICE TO CHRIST. IF YOU ARE TOO BUSY TO FIND TIME TO BE WITH THE LORD, YOU ARE TOO BUSY!! While **the Lord commends Mary**, here and in John 12:7, **He does not condemn Martha**; He only steers her in the right direction!

E. Characteristics. With these known facts in mind, let us see the characteristics of the two sisters. Let us note their strengths and their weaknesses, their needs and the divine provisions to meet these needs.

I picture MARTHA as the type of person who would walk into bedlam and instantly know how to set things straight. She is resolute, strong-willed and can work circles around ten others. She is impatient and steps in when others will hesitate. It would probably drive her up a wall to see some sit and daydream. Martha can think and act under pressure. She does not tend to come undone in the face of a crisis or tragedy, but she does come apart over little things. She has strong character, but she has a hair-trigger temper. Possibly, she is harsh and abrupt in her words. She is the kind who always has more than one iron in the fire and more to do than she has time to do! A bundle of energy, Martha would not want to sit at Jesus' feet and listen for long periods of time; her mind would conjure up the multitude of chores that needed doing. If she saw Mary dawdling over a task, she would likely push her out of the way and do it herself. She is practical!

Martha would make an excellent leader, but she would have the tendency to try to run the others' life. She has a domineering trait in her. She is good in what she does, and she expects the same of those around her. She may even have a problem with pride and harbor a grudge. I think that Martha's biggest problem would come in the area of TRUSTING THE LORD. She is a born DO-IT-YOURSELFER--"Get out of my way, and let me at it!" She may have a tendency to be hard and not able to enter into the grief or thought of others. She is too busy; there is work to be done!

I picture Mary as a dreamer. Highly idealistic, she would live on a high mental plane. She can sit and reflect by the hour on some truth, some doctrine, or at the feet of Jesus. She has the ability to concentrate for long periods of time and would spend hours meditating on the Word. On the other hand, Mary is emotional. An incurable melancholic by nature, she would often be down in the dumps and ready to weep. She would feel grief and pain intensely. Unlike Martha, Mary would sit and plan her actions and fully intend to carry them out. But somewhere along the line she would get lost in thought and get very little work done, if any. Her outlook on life would be gloomy and pessimistic. She would be easily hurt and brood over matters, concentrating on them as a dog would on a bone. This is the type of person whose closets would be full of skeletons from which they would not want to part. Even if she bore a grudge, chances are that she would not get around to getting even; if she felt depressed, she would have deep remorse over past sins, long-confessed but taken out and reviewed periodically.

Like Martha, Mary has definite needs in her life, both spiritual and physical, for all of which the Lord has fully provided. For Martha's cares of this world there is SPIRITUAL REFRESHMENT! For her business there is rest, the rest of faith! For Mary's dreaming there is the REALITY OF LIFE ABUNDANT IN CHRIST! For her depression there is the JOY OF THE LORD! **Martha needs balance in her life and so does Mary.** That need can be met in the proper application of the teaching of the Word!

II. PERSONAL APPLICATION

Are you a Martha or a Mary? The Holy Spirit saw fit to place both women in the same context! Why? BECAUSE BOTH EXIST IN THE WORLD, AND BOTH HAVE THEIR PLACE IN GOD'S PLAN! THERE IS **A DEFINITE NEED** FOR THEIR AREAS OF STRENGTH AND **A DEFINITE CURE** FOR THEIR AREAS OF WEAKNESS! THERE IS ROOM IN THE BODY OF CHRIST FOR BOTH TYPES, those who minister and those who are ministered unto. ONE BALANCES OUT THE OTHER! This is brought out in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, the passage on the Body of Christ and its members. Note particularly verses 12-18! YOU CANNOT FIT INTO MY PLACE IN GOD'S PLAN, NOR I IN YOURS! We can serve best in our own areas of strength, on the basis of our own individuality!

That means that **the Marthas** of this world **must not superimpose their standards on the Marys, nor vice versa.** But there is hope for us all, even as there is help from God. That hope is found in such passages as **2 Corinthians 5:17**; you are **a new creature in Christ, accepted in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6)** regardless of your shortcomings. You are still the same person, with the same idiosyncrasies and the same old sin nature! Yet, **your potential is far greater than you dreamed possible**; you are **marked out to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29)**, changed **from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18)** --not by our own efforts but by the Spirit of the Lord! Until then, you can learn from Martha and Mary a lesson on BALANCE! AVOID THEIR MISTAKES; SHINE WHERE THEY' SHINE!

Marthas need to **practice SELF-CONTROL** under the control of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 12:9; Gal. 5:23--temperance, meekness)! They need to **learn to TRUST AND WAIT ON GOD** (Prov. 3:5, 6). They must not be too self-reliant but **see their SUFFICIENCY IN CHRIST** (2 Cor. 3:5)! They must say, "NOT I, BUT THE LORD" (Gal. 2:20)! **They need a lesson in HUMILITY!**

Marys need to get their heads out of the clouds and **come down to reality.** As the saying goes, "You can be so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good!" The Book of Ecclesiastes says rightly that "to everything there is a season" (Eccl. 3:1). **LEARN TO BUDGET YOUR TIME** (Psa. 90:12)! REDEEM THE TIME; DON'T DREAM IT AWAY (Gal. 5:15)! **DON'T BROOD** (Phil. 4:8; Phil. 3:13)! **Marys must get their eyes off themselves, off things, off others and on the Lord** (Heb. 12:2)! **But so must the Marthas and all the rest of us!**

Romans 15:4 applies beautifully: AS THEY, SO WE NEED TO HEED AND APPLY THE WORD! THANK GOD THAT HE IS INFINITELY PATIENT WITH US!