

MARY & MARTHA:

Balancing Life's Priorities

Alice Mathews uses the experiences of her life and heart to bring fresh perspective to the Word of God. She has been a missionary, pastor's wife, mother, and grandmother. Now with an earned doctorate, she's a chaired Professor at Gordon-Conwell Seminary.

It takes a busy woman to understand the heart of Martha, a busy, overworked woman in the New Testament. It also takes a reflective woman who loves to learn at the feet of her Lord to understand the heart of Martha's sister, Mary.

I believe Alice is just such a woman. And she shares her insights about Mary and Martha in the following pages.

Martin R. De Haan II

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MARY & MARTHA: How To Live Successfully In Two Worlds

When I entered fifth grade, I began studying what was then called “domestic science.” By the time I reached high school, the name had changed to “home economics.” I understand college course catalogs now label it “human ecology.” By any name it was the same: a semester of cooking, a semester of sewing, a semester of cooking, a semester of sewing. You may have found yourself in a similar track.

I’m not sure which I hated most—the cooking or the sewing. At age 10 I could not separate eggs neatly or make decent flat-

felled seams. I remember mostly that I dreaded the hours spent in the domestic science rooms.

We learned to sew using treadle machines. No electric wizards then. When I stopped recently at a fabric store for a pattern, I glanced at the array of modern sewing machines on display—wonderful electronic computerized miracle workers! While I stood there admiring technology in the service of seamstresses, I also noticed one thing that has hardly changed since my first introduction to domestic science 50 years ago. On the front of the sewing machine just above the needle is a dial that adjusts the tension on the thread as the machine sews.

For a strong, firm seam a thread from the spool above and another thread

from the bobbin below must interlock smoothly and tightly in the fabric. An experienced seamstress checks the thread tension and makes minute adjustments in setting that dial because she understands how important it is that the tension be regulated properly.

At times as I sew, I accidentally bump that dial. I hear the click-click that tells me I've messed up the delicate balance of upper and lower threads. I know that no seams will be strong and usable until I get the tension adjusted again. Everything else has to stop until I'm satisfied that the threads are interlocking properly.

As I read through Luke 10:38-42 recently, I thought about the tension dial on my sewing machine. Luke wrote about a dinner

party held in a home in Bethany:

As Jesus and His disciples were on their way, He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Him and asked, "Lord, don't You care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Here's the scene: A hot day at the end of the rainy season as summer was beginning. A whitewashed

village on a hillside just 2 miles east of Jerusalem. The home of Martha who was possibly a well-to-do widow who had taken in her younger sister Mary and younger brother Lazarus.

She welcomes Jesus and His followers to her home in Bethany. She hurries to arrange a comfortable seat for Jesus and then to bring a cool drink to each of her guests. She nods to Mary who fills the basin near the door with water, then takes a towel and begins to wash each guest's feet. Jesus' followers seat themselves around the large room, chatting quietly about events of recent days. Villagers begin to crowd the doorway, anxious to come in and listen to the great Rabbi, Jesus.

This is not His first visit to Bethany. The townsfolk

have heard some of His surprising stories before. Perhaps He will tell them more. A few edge in and sit down outside the ring of disciples. It's possible that both Martha and Mary take their places at Jesus' feet to learn from Him. (Luke 10:39 in the NKJV says that Mary *also* sat at Jesus' feet.)

I don't know how long Martha sat there listening to the Lord Jesus. But I have a feeling that if she was anything like me, she sat there that day with a divided mind. After all, here were 13 men who would be hungry and needed to be fed. What was on hand to feed them? What would it take to get everything ready? Would she need to slip out and run to a few shops for grain or fruit?

I identify with Martha. I know exactly what she was doing as she sat

there. First, she made a mental inventory of everything in the pantry. After that, she planned the menu, making sure she didn't overlook anything. Then she made a list in her head of all the tasks that would have to be done. When she had thought everything through, she glanced around the room surreptitiously to see the best route through the crowd to get from where she was sitting into the kitchen. When she had plotted her exit, she could sit there no longer. She had to get busy! After all, she was the hostess. It was her responsibility to meet the needs of her guests. No one would think less of Lazarus or Mary if the meal were not adequate. The blame would land squarely on her. No time to sit and listen to Jesus now—

perhaps after all the work was done.

Once in the kitchen, she felt that flush of excitement that comes to many of us when we are about to do something special for someone we really care about. We want everything to be perfect—well, at least as nearly perfect as possible. Our love energizes us. We are exhilarated by the opportunity to show our love for someone special.

Can you see Martha, now in the familiar territory of her kitchen, turning into a whirlwind of activity? First, start the beans and lentils cooking with onions and garlic. Then dress the lamb for roasting. Grind the grain and mix the bread for baking. Then prepare the figs and pomegranates. Get water to mix with the wine. Set the table. Stir

the beans and lentils. Turn the lamb on the spit. Start baking the bread.

Glancing out the window at the position of the sun in the sky, Martha suddenly realized it would soon be mealtime and she was far from finished. She may have felt what I feel when I've been carried along on the crest of my enthusiasm, only to realize I'm running out of time and I can't finish everything I planned to do. When that happens, I get angry—angry with myself and angry with anyone else who might have made a difference in accomplishing my plans.

I suspect that is what happened to Martha. Suddenly the plans and the work that had started out as pure joy turned sour. Luke tells us in verse 40 that she was distracted by all the preparations she was making. The harder

she worked, the more worked up she became.

It was Mary's fault. If Mary had been there to help her, it would have been different.

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***The harder
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We all know that feeling, don't we? It's bad enough having everything to do. It's even worse when someone we think should be helping us pull the load lets us down. Our irritation about the unfairness of it all builds to the bursting point.

That's what happened to Martha. In verse 40, she finally explodes:

*Lord, don't you care that
my sister has left me to*

*do the work by myself?
Tell her to help me!*

Interesting, isn't it, that Martha spoke her irritation to Jesus, not to Mary. Perhaps she had already tried unsuccessfully to catch Mary's eye and signal her to get up and help. Or she may have nudged Mary, who shook off her nudge and went on listening to Jesus.

We all have ways we use to get a message across. We clear our throat. We drum our fingers on the table top. We make attention-getting motions. It irritates us even more when the other person ignores us!

Whatever had already happened, Martha spoke directly to Jesus, accusing Him of not caring about her. She was sure that, if He really cared, He would tell Mary to get up and help her.

I'm intrigued by the way Martha linked Jesus' care for her to His willingness to tell Mary to get busy. Martha thought she knew just how Jesus should demonstrate His care—by lightening her load.

That is exactly what we see Him doing, though not in the way she expected. In His response we learn much about our discipleship as Christian women:

Martha, Martha, . . . you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her (Lk. 10:41-42).

The problem did not lie in the work Martha was doing. It was her attitude of fretting and worrying that created the bad situation. Jesus knew

that Martha put too much stress on things that didn't matter. Martha's problem was one of balance, of holding life in the proper tension. Take a closer look at what Jesus said and did not say to this overburdened woman.

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First, Jesus did not rebuke her for making preparations for Him and His disciples. If she as the hostess in the home had decided to skip any food preparation, her guests would have gone hungry. What was going on in that Bethany

kitchen was important.

Do you recall what Jesus had said to Satan when tempted in the wilderness at the outset of His public ministry? In Matthew 4:4 we read, "Man does not live on bread alone." Jesus did not say, "People don't live on bread." We *do* live on bread. We have bodies that must be fed. Jesus knew that and fed people—as many as 5,000 at one time.

But Jesus also knew that people are more than bodies. We do not live on bread alone. To feed our spirits is at least as important as feeding our bodies. Martha's problem was not that she was preparing food for her guests to eat. That was necessary, and in her role as hostess, it was her place to see that it was done. But she gave it too much importance. Instead

of settling for a simple supper, she tried to impress with an elaborate meal. Jesus in essence told her that one dish would have been enough.

We all have responsibilities we carry out every day of our lives. We go to the office. We cook. We grade papers. We clean the house. We do the laundry. We do these things, and we want to do them well. Dorothy Sayers reminds us that no crooked table legs came out of the carpenter shop in Nazareth. God is not honored by shoddy work or the neglect of our necessary duties in life.

But we must be sure that the necessary doesn't get out of proportion and distort our lives. We can easily confuse means and ends. Without thinking, we can turn what is a means of living for God into an end in itself.

When we take something that is not too important and make it primary in our lives, what is otherwise harmless can become a stumbling block for us.



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One of the things Jesus saw that afternoon 2,000 years ago was that Martha was looking down on what Mary had chosen to do. Martha imposed her value system—possibly a sparkling house and certainly a sumptuous meal—on Mary. If bustling around

was “necessary” for Martha, it must also be necessary for Mary.

Note that Jesus did not tell Martha to do what Mary was doing. At the same time, He pointed out that Mary had chosen the good part. In saying this, Jesus made a little play on words that does not come through in English translations. In essence He said, “Martha, you are preparing many dishes for us to eat, but Mary has prepared the one dish you can’t fix in your kitchen.” While food was necessary, something much simpler would have been better, allowing Martha to continue sitting with Mary and learning from Christ.

Do you think Jesus was being a bit hard on Martha? After all, she was doing all this work to please Him! Yet do you think He was pleased with her request that He tell

Mary to get up and help her? Do you think Mary was pleased to be humiliated in that way? Do you think the disciples and neighbors were pleased to have the Teacher interrupted in that way? And what about Martha herself? Do you think she was pleased with herself? We know when we have spoiled things for ourselves and others around us. And spoil things Martha did!

As you picture this scene in your mind, what image of Martha comes into your head? Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel remarked that whenever she thinks of Martha, she remembers a picture from a children’s Bible. In it Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet listening and Martha is in the background, leaning against the kitchen door with an evil, mistrustful

look on her face.


When we think about these two sisters, we tend to imagine Mary with an aura of holiness around her, and we associate Martha with olive oil and fish.

When someone says, “She’s a Martha-type,” we know just what that means. Someone who is practical, competent, down-to-earth. Marthas are certainly useful and necessary. The church would be in a tough spot if we were all Marys. But when it comes to painting a model or an ideal, it’s Mary all the way. That puts us in a bind of sorts, if we think about it. Martha’s work is necessary—in the church and in the home. But Mary gets the halo.

Martha, called the patron saint of housewives and cooks, comes in for quite a bit of

bashing. Martin Luther wrote, “Martha, your work must be punished and counted as naught I will have no work but the work of Mary.”

Stiff words! So I feel a bit sheepish about being a Martha. But Martin Luther was wrong. Martha’s work


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must not be punished and counted as naught. Martha’s attitude needed correcting. Martha’s perspective needed changing. But Martha’s work is good and necessary.

The reality is that as followers of Jesus Christ we need to cultivate both the Martha and the Mary in each of us.

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Earlier in Luke 10 we find the story of a lawyer who tried to trap Jesus by asking Him what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus turned the question back on the lawyer by asking him simply, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The lawyer responded with two great statements taken from Deuteronomy 6:5

and Leviticus 19:18—we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

The lawyer got the answer absolutely right. Jesus agreed, saying, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

The lawyer could have left it at that, but he didn't. He pressed Jesus with another question: “And who is my neighbor?” To answer that, Jesus told one of those wonderful stories that take us by surprise.

The story was about a man traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho on a dusty mountain road. Some thieves attacked him, stripped him naked, beat him, and left him half dead. First, a priest came by. He might have just finished his week of

service rotation in Jerusalem and was on his way home for another year. He saw this poor man but went out of his way to avoid any contact with him. Then a Levite came along. Levites in first-century Israel were lower-order priests who sang at the time of the sacrifice and who served as doorkeepers and servants to the higher-order priests. The Levite, like the priest, glanced at the injured man and passed by on the other side of the road.

The third person who came along was a Samaritan, despised by the Jews. You have to know how much Jews detested Samaritans to have any idea how shocking this story was that Jesus would say a Samaritan came along. This despised foreigner saw the man, and instead

of doing what the religious Jews had done, he stopped and dressed and bandaged the poor man's wounds, put the man on his donkey, and took him to an inn where he cared for him. He even paid the innkeeper to continue caring for the man while he went on his way.

What was the punch line? When Jesus finished the story, He asked the lawyer who he thought was a neighbor to the injured man. Of course, the lawyer had to say, "The one who had mercy on him" (v.37). And Jesus answered, "Go and do likewise."

Wasn't that just what Martha had done? Hadn't she inconvenienced herself to treat Jesus and His disciples kindly? Wasn't she meeting someone else's need? Absolutely! Wasn't she being a "good Samaritan"

while Mary ignored the physical needs of their guests as the two religious Jews had ignored the man who was beaten and robbed?

Take a second look at the answer for which Jesus commended that first-century lawyer: We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

Note the order of the two loves: God first, then neighbor. Not the other way around. It is not a question of contrasting the activist life to the contemplative life. It's a matter of priorities. We put listening to and learning the Word of God before service. That equips and inspires us for our service for God and to others.

What Jesus wanted that

day was not Martha's lentils and lamb, but Martha herself. The one dish she could not prepare in her kitchen was her relationship to God. She could prepare that dish only by remaining at Jesus' feet and letting Him provide the food for her soul.



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Martha wanted Jesus to lighten her load that day. He did exactly that, but not the way she thought it should be done. He knew that our relationship with God does not develop in

the midst of fretting busyness. The one thing needful is to hear God speak to us. Mary chose to put time into that primary relationship and not to be distracted by trivia.

“Martha must be a Mary,” wrote one commentator, “and the true Mary must also be a Martha; both are sisters.” That brings me back to my sewing machine tension dial. If the tension on the top thread is too loose, the underside of the fabric will be snarled with excess thread. The seam has no strength. It pulls apart hopelessly the moment pressure is applied to it. The only thing a seamstress can do is pull out all the threads, adjust the tension, and start over.

We also have no usable seam if the threads are not feeding from both the top spool and the bobbin underneath. We could try

to sew all day with only the top spool on the machine and nothing in the bobbin holder. We would not have a single seam. The Martha thread and the Mary thread must both be properly feeding and interlocking if we are to have any seam at all. The balance between the two has to be finely adjusted if the resulting seam is to be strong and usable.

We live in this world. This means we concern ourselves with food and clothes and homes and family and jobs and studies. But we also live in the world of the spirit. We concern ourselves with our relationship to God. That was Martha's real problem. She was sewing with no thread in the bobbin.

To get our service right, we get our priorities right. We let Jesus minister to

us before we go out to minister for Him. That is God's order: we first love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and then we are prepared to go out and love our neighbor as ourselves. When we turn that upside down, we may end up feeling overworked and unappreciated. When



When we have the right priorities, God will enable us to do what needs to be done— with joy and satisfaction.



we keep our priorities in line with God's priorities, we will find that God enables us to do what needs to be done with joy and satisfaction.

MARTHA & MARY: How To Nourish Hope In Times Of Loss

When my husband finished his studies at Denver Seminary in 1956, we moved to his first pastorate in a small town in central Wyoming. As we got acquainted with the leaders of the church, we came to appreciate one older couple in particular. Gene, a retired carpenter, arrived at the church every morning to help build an addition to the church education wing. Mae stopped by almost as often. We admired the tireless commitment to Jesus Christ and to His church they both lived in front of us daily.

About 6 months after

we arrived, a phone call brought the news that their only son Don had just been crushed to death in a local open-pit mine accident. We hurried across town to be with Gene and Mae, who we knew would be struggling with shock and disbelief. It would be an excruciating time for them as they moved through their grief. But we were sure they would make it. They had all the Christian resources to support them during this crisis. Other friends came in, and we were confident that an entire community would surround them, their daughter-in-law, and two grandsons with love and concern.

A few days after the funeral Gene returned to his volunteer work on the church building. But on Sundays he came to church alone. When we dropped by their house,

we sensed that Gene was finding strength to cope with his grief, but it was different for Mae.

When we asked about this, we learned that from the time word of the accident came, Mae turned her back on God. How could she believe in a God who would deny them their only child and deny their grandsons a father? God could not possibly be loving and kind and, at the same time deal them such a blow. Whenever we visited her, we listened to her case against God. It was clear that the facts of her faith and the facts of her life didn't mesh. The faith that we thought would sustain her seemed to get in her way.

Mae reminded me of two other women who sent for Jesus when their brother was seriously ill. But Jesus didn't arrive in

time to help them. When He finally showed up, both women said to Him, “Lord, if you had been here, our brother wouldn’t have died!” These sisters had enough faith to believe that if Jesus had come He could have healed their brother. But it looked as if Jesus had let them down.

The story is found in John 11. The first six verses tell us this:

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped His feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one You love is sick.”

When He heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death.

No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days.

That’s the setting.

Lazarus was sick. His two sisters, Mary and Martha, turned at once to their friend Jesus, hoping He would come quickly and heal their brother before it was too late.

Knowing that Jesus loved this trio, we would expect Him to set out immediately for Bethany to do what He could to spare them anxiety and grief. Yet we see Jesus not responding in the way the two sisters hoped. Instead of leaving at once for Bethany, He stayed where He was 2 more days.

An important principle in life is that love permits

pain. We don't want it that way. We want to believe that if God truly loves us He will not allow anything painful to invade our lives. But this is not so. God's love does not guarantee us a shelter from difficult experiences that are necessary for our spiritual growth. Love and delay are compatible.



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If Jesus had rushed off to Bethany as soon as He received word of Lazarus' illness, Mary and Martha would not have been suspended between hope

and fear—hope that the One who could help their brother would arrive in time, fear that He might come too late. They would have been spared the anguish of watching Lazarus sink into death. They would have avoided the agony of those last moments before they closed Lazarus' eyes and prepared his body for burial. They would have forestalled the desolation of bereavement. But Jesus didn't come.

He knew that it was time for Mary, Martha, and His disciples to learn what they could not learn if He intervened too quickly. John 11 tells us how completely in control of the situation Jesus was. He knew just what He was doing. He knew that the spiritual growth of Martha and Mary and His band of disciples traveling with Him depended on

the right timing. How do we know that? Read John 11:7-16.

Then He said to His disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone You, and yet You are going back there?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

After He had said this, He went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of His death, but His

disciples thought He meant natural sleep.

So then He told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."

Divine timing. Jesus knew that Mary and Martha would never know Him as the resurrection and the life if Lazarus had not died. David would not have known God as his rock and his fortress had he not been hunted by Saul in the mountains of En Gedi. The Israelites would not have known God as their deliverer had they not been slaves in Egypt. Our painful experiences can reveal God to us in new ways.

Jesus knew precisely what He was doing.

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On His arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for 4 days. Many Jews had come from Jerusalem to Bethany to comfort Martha and Mary in the loss of their brother. Sympathy for them was the first of all duties. Nothing else was more important than expressing sorrow with the bereaved.

In the hot climate of Israel the deceased had to be buried immediately after death. Women anointed the body with the finest spices and ointments, then wrapped

it in a linen garment with the hands and feet swathed in bandage-like wrappings and the head enclosed in a towel.

Everyone who could possibly come would join the procession from the house to the tomb. Curiously, women walked first because, according to the teachers of the day, it was a woman by her sin in the Garden of Eden who was responsible for death coming into the world.

At the tomb, friends made memorial speeches. Then the mourners formed two long lines between which the family members walked. As long as the dead body remained in the house, the family was forbidden to prepare food there, to eat meat or drink wine, or to study. When the body was carried out, all the furniture was turned upside-down and

the mourners sat on the ground or on low stools. On returning from the tomb, they ate a meal of bread, hard-boiled eggs, and lentils, symbolizing life, which was always rolling toward death.

Deep mourning lasted 7 days, during which no one could anoint himself, put on shoes, engage in study or business, or even wash. Thirty days of lighter mourning followed the week of heavy mourning.

In the middle of this period of deep mourning, Martha heard that Jesus was entering the village. Violating the conventions of the Middle East, she went out to meet Him while Mary stayed in the house. The remarkable conversation Martha and Jesus had is recorded in John 11:21-27.

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if You had been

here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered, “I know 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 will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she told Him, “I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” In that statement Martha gave voice to her doubt that

Jesus had unlimited power. Had He been there, this would not have happened. He had to be present to heal her brother. Yet her general confidence in Jesus shines through: “But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask.”

Jesus answered her by turning her mind to the promise of the resurrection: “Your brother will rise again.” Martha seemed impatient as she shot back, “Yes, Lord, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

She knew the truth. She had the doctrine down right. In fact, she had a stronger spiritual base than the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection. In her statement she bore witness to the strong teaching of her nation’s faith. But she didn’t find

much comfort in the future tense. In that moment she needed something more immediate than an event as far off as “the resurrection at the last day.” The doctrine was not particularly consoling in her time of sorrow.



The doctrine of the resurrection was not particularly consoling to Martha in her time of sorrow.



Jesus saw that and turned her idea of resurrection as a future event into a present reality: “I am the resurrection and the life.” What must Martha have felt in that dramatic moment! “I am the

resurrection and the life!” With those startling words Jesus brought Martha’s thoughts from a dim future hope to a present fact. He gave her faith its true object, Himself. Confidence in Jesus Christ, the God-Man who is the resurrection and the life, could replace her vague hope in a future event.

How do we get that confidence? Jesus told us how in verse 25: “He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.”

When we believe in Jesus Christ, we gain a quality of life that is larger than death. Death becomes not the end of life, but the door into a larger life. People call our world “the land of the living.” We might better call it “the land of the dying.” We begin to die

the moment we are born, and our lives are an inexorable move toward death. But those who have believed in Jesus Christ know that when death comes, we do not pass *out* of the land of the living but *into* the land of the living. We are not on our way to death. We are on our way to life. That’s what it means to be born again. That’s what it



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means to have eternal life. That’s what it means to believe in Jesus Christ.

How did Jesus end His statement to Martha? He

asked, “Do you believe this?” With that question He brought her to the question of personal faith. The faith that leads to eternal life can never be a faith we have inherited from our grandparents or that we acquire from being around the pastor. It is a personal commitment each one of us must make.

To Jesus’ question Martha gave a remarkable answer (v.27): “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” Compare that to Peter’s great confession (Mt. 16:16). Jesus had asked him, “Who do you say I am?” Peter had responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responded that upon that confession, that truth, the church would be built.

Martha understood the

same truth. Where had she learned it? Had she sat at Jesus’ feet? Had she listened to Him teach the crowds? Clearly this woman, though her faith was imperfect, grasped the central truth on which it could grow: Jesus is the one sent by God.

It is the same for us today. It is on the truth Martha spoke that day in Bethany 2,000 years ago that you and I come to the One who is the resurrection and the life. We cannot begin to grow until we see Jesus for who He is and come to Him as we are.

The story moves on. Martha returned to the house and, taking Mary aside, told her that the Teacher had arrived and asked for her. Mary got up quickly and went to meet Jesus. She, in turn, spoke the same words Martha had used: “Lord, if You

had been here, my brother would not have died.” The same words Martha had used, but with one omission. Martha had gone on to say, “But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask.” Martha, for all her shortcomings, spoke of her faith. Mary, in contrast, was overwhelmed by her grief. She had sat at Jesus’ feet and learned from Him. But now in His presence she was wrung out with her all-consuming sorrow.

When we read the other Mary-Martha story in Luke 10, it appeared that Mary was the “spiritual” one and Martha was the “unspiritual” one. Now as we look at these same two women, we discover that practical Martha had understood enough to give a magnificent confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Mary, on the other hand, was too

engulfed in her loss to do more than say, “Jesus, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”



***God starts with us
where we are.
But He doesn't
leave us there.
He moves us to
a deeper level
of faith.***



Note how Jesus adjusted to each one’s need. With Martha, even in a time of deep mourning, He spoke deep theological truth. With Mary, He sympathized. He met her where she was so that He could take her to a different level of faith. Thus it is with each of us. God starts with us where we are. But He

doesn't leave us there. He moves us to a deeper level of faith.

The stage was now set. Four days had passed since Lazarus died. The usual Middle Eastern tomb was a cave with shelves cut in the rock on three sides. At the opening of the tomb a groove was made in the ground and a great wheel-shaped stone was set in the groove so it could be rolled across the entrance to the cave. For the Jews it was important that the entrance be well sealed. They believed that the spirits of the departed hovered around the tombs for 4 days, seeking entrance again into the body of the departed one. But after 4 days they left, because by then the body would be so decayed that they could no longer recognize it.

The mourners had followed Mary and now

gathered in front of the cave. The customary point of view was that the more unrestrained the mourning, the more honor they paid to the dead. These who had come to comfort Mary and Martha were not quietly weeping with heads bowed. Instead, they honored Lazarus with unrestrained wailing, with hysterical shrieking.

Jesus stood in the midst of the crowd of mourners. In both verses 33 and 38 John described Him by using a Greek word that is not accurately translated in many Bibles. Jesus was more than "deeply moved." He shuddered with indignation.

Indignation at what? Jesus stood there that day as the Lord of life, the one who had just told Martha that He was the resurrection and the life. There He was face to face with all the effects of the

Fall: death, human misery, broken hearts. He had come into the world to deliver us from death and condemnation. He knew that as He confronted and conquered death that day, the final conquest could come in only one way. He too would have to pass through death. He would have to taste its bitterness. He would have to die.

He shuddered—shuddered at the awfulness of death. He shuddered at the consequences of sin. He shuddered at the pain of alienation. He shuddered with indignation that any of this had to happen. And then He acted. He spoke four times.

Speaking to the mourners, He simply said, “Take away the stone” (Jn. 11:39). Jesus could have told the stone to roll away without human help, but He didn’t. Those who

stood there that day were given that task. God works with an economy of divine power. He requires us to do what we can do. He tests us by involving us in His miracles. “Take away the stone.”

Had the Jews standing there heard correctly? Take away the stone? Surely Jesus couldn’t be serious! Martha echoed their thoughts when she protested, “But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Martha just missed the point of that conversation out on the roadside. Jesus had to remind her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (v.40). Jesus worked to raise Martha’s faith to a higher level so that she could look beyond the earthly, the practical, and the mundane to see spiritual

reality. “Take away the stone.”



Jesus worked to raise Martha's faith to a higher level so that she could look beyond the earthly, the practical, and the mundane to see spiritual reality.



The second time Jesus spoke, it was to God:

Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me.

Martha had said she believed that. But did the others? Did Mary? Did the

disciples? Jesus laid His divine claim on the line to lead people to faith.

The third time Jesus spoke, He addressed Lazarus: “Lazarus, come out!” (v.43). The dead man stumbled out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a towel around his face. The crowd fell back, awestruck. Were their senses playing tricks on their minds? They had seen a corpse carried into that tomb 4 days earlier. It could not be true that Lazarus was alive again!

Jesus had not prayed, “Father, raise him from death!” Nor had He said, “In the name of the Father, come out.” He had told Martha that He was the resurrection and the life. He acted on His own authority. He was the Lord of life, so Lazarus came out.

The fourth time Jesus spoke, it was again to the astonished audience: “Take off the grave clothes and let him go” (v.44). The gasping bystanders needed to touch Lazarus and see for themselves that he was not a ghost.

Two things happened. First, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary put their faith in Jesus (v.45). That was the immediate result. Second, word of this incredible miracle soon reached the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They saw Jesus as a threat to their power. They met to seal His fate with a sentence of death.

A sentence of death? Yes, for Him. But a sentence of life for all of us who believe. He is the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Him will live, even though that person dies. Whoever lives and believes in Him

will never die. Do you believe this?

The old storytellers in many lands tell of a fabulous bird, sacred to the sun, called the phoenix. This huge bird, covered with an iridescent rainbow of gorgeous feathers, had no equal on earth. Not only was no other bird so beautiful, but none other sang so sweetly nor lived so long. The storytellers could not agree on the age of the phoenix. Some said the bird lived for 500 years. Others said its life was more than 12,000 years long.

When those years ended, the phoenix made itself a nest of twigs from spice trees, set its nest on fire, and, with the nest, was consumed. Nothing remained except a scattering of ashes on the earth. But then, the storytellers said, a breeze

caught those ashes and somehow from them there arose another phoenix, a new firebird even more splendid than the one that had died. He would spread his wings, they said, and he would fly up to the sun.

The storytellers spun this myth in the fond hope that somehow it could be true. They spoke to something deep within each of us, the longing that out of the destructive tragedies of life, something better, more magnificent might come. What the storytellers could only imagine contains a truth of which Jesus Christ is the reality. Just as the more glorious phoenix can rise only from the ashes of its dead self and ruined nest, so great faith rises only from our dashed hopes and ruined dreams.

“If God wants you to trust Him,” wrote Donald Grey Barnhouse, “He puts

you in a place of difficulty. If He wants you to trust Him greatly, He puts you in a place of impossibility. For when a thing is impossible, then we who are so prone to move things by the force of our own being can say, ‘Lord, it has to be You. I am utterly, absolutely nothing.’”



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Lazarus lived only to die again. A second time

the sisters went to the tomb with the corpse of their beloved brother. This time there was no resurrection. But Jesus had taken Martha's theology and had given it vitality: "He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die." If you believe in a God of resurrection, you can face the cemetery and know that even out of death can come life. It is, in the words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, in dying that we live.

But not all funerals lead to life. When Mae lost her only son, she lost sight of God and His power and love. She could not see that the phoenix rises from the ashes of its own death. She missed the reality that life invades death. She forgot—or never knew—that Jesus

Christ passed through death to conquer it for all time and eternity.

As we experience the pain of loss, we can miss the phoenix. Yet Jesus speaks the same words to us that He spoke to Martha 2,000 years ago on the road into Bethany: "I am the resurrection and the life." After death comes resurrection. We can trust God's perfect timing. We can trust His love. We can come through our difficult experiences stronger in faith and hope as we learn that God is there for us in our loss, in our sorrow. What we let Christ do in our situation makes the difference.



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