

Mary, Sister of Lazarus: Passionate Devotion

This Bible study series focuses on learning from Jesus and developing an honest, loving relationship with him. You will concentrate on three main passages that retell the interactions between Mary and Jesus. Mary's story emphasizes themes of intimacy with Christ, valuing him above all else and crossing difficult boundaries to be with him. The format of this study will help groups to learn basic skills of observation, interpretation and application as well as inform of the historical and cultural context of Mary's life

How does inductive Bible study work?

Inductive Bible study is based upon a few key concepts that allow you to understand the actual events and people in a Bible passage as well as the meanings and truths GOD communicates to us through the stories of his people. This is a chance for your group to put some work into examining the setting, characters, words, pictures and repetitions for yourselves and see what GOD is trying to communicate to you as a group as well as an individual. What are the key concepts of inductive Bible study?

- 1) **Observation** – Observation questions focus on looking at the facts of a passage in an in-depth way. Observation questions focus on the who, what, where, when and how of a passage as well as the repeated phrases, themes and context. What was the culture like? What were people's roles like? Sometimes it can be tempting to jump past observation questions because at first they may seem too simple. However, what story can fully be understood if we don't set up the scene and get to know the characters? Use the text's words and try to understand them. Don't be tempted to use fancy theological words if they aren't there.
- 2) **Interpretation** – Interpretation questions focus on making the links between what has been observed and what GOD seems to be communicating as the meaning of a person's story. These questions will focus more on the whys of a passage. Why did GOD choose this person? Why did GOD want to communicate this story in their life? Why does he want us to know it today? Interpretations will impact a group quite deeply if sufficient time is spent observing in the passage.
- 3) **Application** – Application questions ask us to take what we learn and put them into obedient action. They ask questions about how both the individual and the group can show that they have been affected by God's communication, thereby changing the course of their stories. Be prepared for personal sharing and brainstorming as to how the group can grow in action together.

LEADERS, feel free to pare down the questions in the interest of time, but please concentrate on each section of observation, interpretation and application.

Setting the scene for Mary's Story – Session 1

This portion of the study guide is meant to give some background information on what life was like during the time of Mary, Sister of Lazarus.

What was life like for women at this time in Judea?

In day to day life, women mainly functioned within the home. They were considered daughters, mothers, wives or widows – all terms relevant to their function within the home or to a spouse. There were few exceptions where women were known for their work.

Perspectives on women's roles in Jewish culture were actually taught to the people by rabbis through the Mishnah (a collection of teachings by Jewish rabbis that interpreted the Torah and how to practice worship of God that remained mainly oral in tradition until approximately 300-400 B.C.). The Mishnah mainly dealt with legal matters, and one entire section addresses all matters that affect women. In the Mishnah, women could not divorce and could not testify in a court on their own. Women were to be ruled by their fathers until the day came that they were sold for a dowry settlement. Then they were ruled by their husbands. The Mishnah taught that a woman was like a "gentile slave who could be obtained by intercourse, money or writ (m. Qidd 1:1)."

Rabbinical teachings also emphasized how women could not participate in synagogue life to the same extent as their male counterparts. They were considered levitically unclean for several days each month due to their menstrual cycle. They were not counted in the membership of the synagogue. They were not permitted to recite the daily shema (an affirmation of Judaism and a creed like statement in belief of the one, true God) nor could they read the Torah in the synagogue. Women were not required to take part in any of the feasts or festivals of the Jewish religion. They were given minimal instruction on the Torah, primarily from their fathers or husbands. They were not permitted to teach or to become devotees to any one rabbi. Also, the court of women in the temple was a small, raised gallery area outside of the main altar and worship area where women could observe from a distance, but never participate in the daily rituals.

How were men expected to treat women during this time?

Rabbinical literature of Mary's time warns men about how they should interact with women only within the contexts of marriage and family. Several influential rabbis taught that women should not be saluted or spoken to in the street. Men were supposed to make sure that women always walked six paces behind them. Men were not supposed to instruct women in any of the teachings of the Torah and should not consider them to be followers of any credible rabbinical teaching.

Session 1: Mary chooses what is better

Saturday 10:30am – 12:30pm

Read Luke 10:38-42

Observation Questions:

- ❖ Several people are mentioned in this passage - Jesus, the disciples, Martha and finally, Mary. Who are they? How has Luke described them up to this point? Paint the best picture you can of who these people were before getting into the events of the passage.
- ❖ Jesus and the disciples were on the road ministering to people when they stopped at Mary's and Martha's house. What had they been through up to this point? Feel free to quickly skim through Luke.
- ❖ What does it mean to "open her house to him?" Talk about what this looks like traditionally and culturally speaking.
- ❖ Describe Mary's actions. What would it literally look like to sit at the feet of Jesus?
- ❖ Describe Martha's reactions to Mary and Jesus. How does the text describe her thoughts? What does she say and how does she say it?

- ❖ How does Jesus respond to Martha? What is his tone and what words does he choose to speak to her?
- ❖ How does the text fully describe Mary? What action words does the text use to describe her? What does Mary actively do? In contrast, what doesn't she do?

Interpretation Questions:

- ❖ Compare and contrast Martha and Mary. What are your thoughts about how these sisters are similar and how they are different?
- ❖ What do you think was going through Mary's head when she was deciding to sit at Jesus' feet? What kind of obstacles was she willing to face? Describe the possible emotions she could be experiencing.
- ❖ What do you think the disciples were thinking as Mary was joining in on Jesus' teaching session?
- ❖ Mary was listening to Jesus as he was teaching. What are some of the things that Jesus had been teaching up until then? Feel free to skim through Luke again. What did it mean for Mary to be hearing these things?
- ❖ Describe Jesus' evaluation of Mary. What is he truly saying? What risk(s) does Jesus take in teaching Mary?
- ❖ Mary doesn't speak in this passage, yet she sticks out as a person that Jesus esteems highly. What is it about Mary that makes Jesus think so highly of her?
- ❖ God is trying to tell a story through Mary's life. So far, how would you describe Mary as a character in God's story? What role does Mary take in telling her own story? What do Mary's actions do to help tell the stories of the people around her?

Application Questions

- ❖ What kind of obstacles do you face that keep you from sitting at the feet of Jesus? Are there social or cultural boundaries that make it hard for you to learn from him? Or, are the boundaries more personal?
- ❖ Describe a time when you do feel like you have been able to sit at Jesus' feet. What was it like? What did you carry away from it?
- ❖ Describe ways in which you can cross barriers to learn from Jesus. Come up with a specific plan and talk about how the group can either do this together or keep each other encouraged and accountable. Don't walk away without a concrete plan, because the temptation to not cross barriers to be with Jesus is too great.
- ❖ After you have formulated a plan, think about how this could be part of the story God wants to tell in your life. What does he want you to learn? How does he want "what is better" for you? How will this transform you as a character in God's narrative?

Spend some time praying for your future studies. Ask God to truly make them time when you feel like you are sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Setting the Scene – Session 2

What do we know about illness in Mary's time?

Illness was often seen as being connected with spiritual health. It could be interpreted as a sign of sin in a person's life. Look at Numbers 12:1-16. Also, look at John 9:1-5.

What were the options for the severely sick at this time?

Look at John 5:1-7 and Mark 5:24-28. What are your impressions of healthcare during this time? Discuss also the response of the crowds towards Jesus as a healer. Compare and contrast time before and after Jesus' arrival.

What were some of the thoughts about death and the afterlife at this time?

The afterlife was a much debated topic within Jewish culture at this time. See the debate between Jesus and the Sadducees in Mark 12:18-27. Although the Pharisees held much of the power and did believe in the resurrection of the dead, many of the high priests and most of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees, according to the Eardmans Bible Dictionary. How would this have influenced popular thought as well as those who were facing death and dying?

Session 2: Mary shows honesty in grief

Saturday 7:30-9:30pm

Read John 11:1-44

Observation Questions

- ❖ In verses 1-16, the main characters of this story are introduced. Describe them. Is there anyone new? How have circumstances, emotions and actions either remained the same or have changed for recurring characters?
- ❖ Look specifically at Mary. What new information is revealed about her?
- ❖ Describe the relationship between Jesus and Mary's family. What do their words communicate about the nature of their relationship and how they feel about each other?
- ❖ There seems to be more than one difficult and tense situation described in this first section. What are these situations? Describe them.
- ❖ Talk more about what Jesus' thoughts on Lazarus' illness and death. What seems to be his understanding of the situation? In contrast, what seems to be the understanding of the disciples?
- ❖ Moving on to verses 17-37, describe the scene that Jesus and the disciples enter. Talk about what it could look like and what it would have been like to be a person at this scene.
- ❖ Talk about the interaction between Martha and Jesus. What is Martha's approach toward Jesus? What does she do? What are her beliefs about Jesus?
- ❖ How does Jesus respond to Martha? What does he say about himself?
- ❖ Mary comes back into the story. She lost a brother just like Martha did but her response to the arrival of Jesus is different than Martha's. How is it different? What about her actions and words in this story are consistent or different than when we met Mary at Jesus' feet? How do the people around her perceive her?
- ❖ What does Mary say to Jesus? What does Mary do in front of Jesus?
- ❖ What is Jesus' reaction to Mary? What do we see Jesus do that had never been seen before? What does this tell us about the relationship he had with Mary and her family?
- ❖ Moving on to verses 38-44, what does Jesus do next? What was his demeanor when he sprung into action?
- ❖ What was Martha's response to him? How does her response contrast with Mary's silence?
- ❖ What does Jesus say as he raises Lazarus from the dead? What is he teaching as he responds to Martha and as he prays?
- ❖ Describe what this scene must have looked like. Describe how Jesus wraps things up.

Interpretation Questions

- ❖ Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that "the one you love is sick". What do you think they were really telling him or asking him?

- ❖ Why do you think Jesus wanted to wait to go see Mary and her family? How does it differ from the disciples wanting to wait to go back to Judea?
- ❖ How does Jesus take this opportunity to teach the disciples?
- ❖ Why do you think Martha approached Jesus in the way that she did? What do her words and actions tell you about Martha as a character?
- ❖ Why does Jesus spend so much time explaining the resurrection to Martha? Why do you think he did this for her and not Mary?
- ❖ Why does Mary stay back? Why does she not immediately go to Jesus? Why is she not concerned with offending him or getting to him right away?
- ❖ Why do you think Mary then changes her approach and quickly gets up to see Jesus? What kind of emotions is Mary communicating in her actions? What is her attitude?
- ❖ Jesus weeps when he sees Mary's grief. Talk more about their relationship. How would you describe this relationship? How did they reach this level of intimacy and friendship?
- ❖ When Jesus approaches the tomb, why do you think Mary stays silent? Why do you think she does not state the same doubts as Martha?

Application Questions

- ❖ Mary appears to have been extremely honest with Jesus in this passage. She did not run to him immediately in her grief. She spoke what she truly believed. She wept in front of him. Describe a time when you were completely honest with God. How did he deal with you? Take some time for sharing.
- ❖ Jesus seems to deal with Mary in difficult situations. He praises her for bucking tradition and culture to learn from him. He comforts her after he sees her loss of her only brother. God's story for Mary's life includes many plot twists. What does that tell us about the author of her story? How did these plot twists affect her?
- ❖ How do you as an individual deal with tragedy? How can you respond to God honestly the next time a difficult situation arises?
- ❖ How can your group respond to tragedy as a whole? What kind of steps can you take to respond to this passage as a group? How does God want to write a story about your group's response in the face of difficult times? How can the character traits of honesty and vulnerability be incorporated into your group?

Take some time to pray for your relationship with Jesus. Pray for your trust in him during difficult times to increase. Ask him to show you how he is using the plot twists in your life to create a story about his glory. Spend some time asking for your group to grow together in this.

Setting the Scene – Session 3

Six days before Passover....

From what we know about Jesus' life, this event happened in the last few days before Jesus' death. This was a busy time for Jews since they were preparing for Passover feasts, worship and rituals. This was an extremely important time for Jews since it reminded them about how GOD had spared them from death and delivered them from slavery in Egypt (see Exodus 11-12:42).

What do we know about pure nard?

It is referred to in Song of Songs 1:12 and 4:14 as a descriptor of the preciousness of the lover. It was an herb that was grown in the foothills of the Himalayans and had to be transported from India through Persia. For centuries, it's name evoked what generations thought the lost Garden of Eden smelled like. A phial (nearly a pint) was worth 300 denarii, the average yearly income of a male Jewish laborer. It was rare and precious.

What do we know about women and money during Jesus' time?

Few women had much money at their disposal. Women typically did not make the same amount of money that men did, partly because most women were not allowed to work independent from home duties, but also because they were not on the same wage scale as men. Women who could afford costly gifts were either from wealthier families or were making a large personal sacrifice.

Read John 12:1-11

Sunday 10:15am-12:00pm

Observation Questions

- ❖ Describe the characters at this dinner banquet. Who is there? What has happened for these people since the last time you studied them? Talk about their history. In light of their history, what was the mood of the event potentially like?
- ❖ Martha appears in this passage again. What is she doing? What do her actions tell us about who Martha is now that we have seen her for the third time?
- ❖ Compare and contrast Mary with Martha. What is Mary doing? Be specific and paint a picture of this event. How is what Mary is doing different from what her sister is doing? How is it consistent with who we know as Mary?
- ❖ Discuss the reaction of Judas. What is he saying?
- ❖ What do we learn about Judas? How is Judas similar/different than Mary?
- ❖ How does Jesus respond to Judas? What is Jesus' view of Mary? What does Jesus teach the disciples about Mary's actions?
- ❖ Verses 9-11 summarize the reactions people had of Mary's anointing of Jesus. Who are the different parties? How are they different and how are they similar?

Interpretation Questions

- ❖ What do you think was going through the minds of Jesus and his followers six days before Passover? See Matthew 16:21-28, Mark 8:31-38, Luke 18:31-34.
- ❖ Martha and Mary both seem to show their appreciation for Jesus and their devotion to him in this passage. Compare and contrast them. What stands out for each woman as unique in how she shows love?
- ❖ Mary has the unique privilege in scripture of being the person who anoints Jesus before his death. Do you think she knew she was doing something so symbolic? If so, how? Think about the previous two studies. What had Mary been doing with her time that would have helped her in knowing? What was her relationship like with Jesus that she could have been so in tune with him?
- ❖ Talk about the symbolism of Jesus' anointing. What do you know about anointing in the Bible? Talk about these instances. How is this anointing similar or different?

- ❖ What kind of obstacles did Mary face in order to be able to do this for Jesus? What were the costs of doing this beautiful thing?
- ❖ Why do you think the author gives us background information on Judas? How does this information make the differences between Judas and Mary even more startling?

Application Questions

- ❖ Mary sacrifices her money, her dignity and her reputation to honor Jesus. What is most valuable to you and how can you sacrifice it to show passionate devotion to Jesus? Is it your money? Is it your time? Is it other people's views of you? How can you come up with a plan to really follow through on doing something that shows you value Jesus above all else?
- ❖ Now that we have seen Mary for the third time, summarize her character. What words would you use to describe her? What was important to her? What was not important to her? What did she fear? What did she feel?

Summary Questions

- ❖ Mary definitely came across as a character that was known more for her actions than her words. What do you think of this?
- ❖ Mary and Jesus seemed to have a very intimate and devoted relationship. They strived to spend time together. She was extremely vulnerable in front of him. He experienced her pain. She took what was valuable and gave it to Jesus, even when it seemed foolish to others. How is God wanting to change your story so that the relationship he has with you is similar to the intimacy Jesus and Mary shared?
- ❖ Mary is seen as a unique participant in God's story. However, none of the records of Mary's actions is done in isolation. She is always part of a group. She is part of her family. She is part of Jesus' followers. She is part of the mourners. She is part of a banquet honoring Jesus. Her actions impact the people around her. How is God using the individuals in your group to impact the whole group? Remember, as God is telling each person's story, he is also weaving a collective story of his people!

Pray for God to increase your intimacy with him. Ask him to help you make specific, concrete steps to pursue this kind of loving relationship with him.

Sources:

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