



# Introduction to the **Study**

*a*re you out of shape? Have you stood in front of a mirror and thought, “I need to exercise”? Even with available fitness centers and workout videos, many of us struggle.

The same may be true spiritually. Many sigh, “I’m not as close to God as I want to be” or “I wish I could overcome my spiritual problem with ... .” Paul tells us that training in godliness is even better than bodily exercise because it offers a better life now and in eternity (1 Timothy 4:7-8). Motivation and consistency in spiritual fitness are essential. But in this, too, we struggle.

Scripture teaches us how to improve one’s desire and ability to grow spiritually. It provides examples of women who allowed God’s Word to penetrate their hearts and transform their lives into Christlikeness. But such “spiritual formation” did not come without struggle. Each faced specific trials of life by seeking help from above. Childless Hannah deflected self-pity and Peninnah’s taunts as she poured out her heart to God. Bitter Naomi blamed God for the loss of her husband and sons, but sought relief within His law and people. Helpless Hagar, desperate to save her child, lifted up her voice and wept. Each struggled. Each sought. Each grew.

Their “spiritual formation” resulted from engaging in specific maturity-building exercises such as prayer, listening to God’s Word, service, etc. John Ortberg asserts, “Authentic spiritual transformation begins with training, with discipline.”<sup>1</sup> Because the Greek word for “exercise” (*gymnasia*, from which *gymnastics* derives) may also be translated “discipline” (1 Timothy 4:7-8 NASB), the term “spiritual disciplines” is often used as “a shorthand expression for the spiritual practices that Scripture expects of God’s people.”<sup>2</sup>

This book presents 12 biblical models of the practice of spiritual disciplines. My prayer is that you will be inspired to imitate these women and to engage in these exercises. Then you, too, may become spiritually mature as life’s trials motivate you to struggle, seek and grow.



## Chapter /

# Attentive Listening

## Mary of Bethany

*Luke 10:38-42*

**T**he Weaver twins had finally arrived. Our church family was ecstatic! We had prayed together through some anxious moments – when contractions came too early and when little Anniston seemed to stop growing. Kelly followed her doctor’s orders for rest and nourishment with fervent prayer. Happily, both babies were born with healthy appetites. In time they put on the expected pounds, and we were thankful. Babies are supposed to grow.

This concept is true also in the spiritual realm. Every Christian begins as a babe in Christ. The Scriptures urge us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). But Satan works hard to discourage zeal and commitment. He tempts us to set spiritual nourishment aside and seek satisfaction elsewhere such as in material possessions, popularity, career and relationships with other people. These, however, do not sustain us. Gordon T. Smith beautifully explains, “The words of Jesus are the bread by which we live (John 6), the living water for which we thirst (7:37-38) and the light of the world (8:12). He is water, bread and light to those who listen to his voice.”<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual maturity comes through attentive listening to Jesus through Scripture. Have you experienced growth in regular Bible study? Or do you identify with those who were baptized years ago but remain unskilled in God's Word? If you feel stagnant and immature spiritually, you are not alone.

In 2001, John Ellis conducted a survey of Christians in Memphis, Tenn., and found that the No. 1 felt need among 614 adults was a desire for "enriching their spiritual life."<sup>2</sup> Ellis noted, "Members are hungering to know how to draw closer to God, and they want help."<sup>3</sup> It appears that many failed to receive such help. *The Christian Chronicle* reported in March 2009 that the church experienced a 4.7 percent drop – 526 fewer congregations and 78,436 fewer members – between 2003 and 2009.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, two studies from Regent University (2003) and at the University of California-Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute (2005) showed that American women possess great spiritual hunger. Compared to men, their statistics reveal, women seem to be more concerned and more engaged in personal spiritual quests.<sup>5</sup> Then, why is the church losing members?

Charlton Hillis asserts that large numbers of women are spiritually undernourished. In an article titled "Women's Bible Classes: Fluff or Substance," Hillis observes,

A common picture at our lectureships and seminars is a Greek scholar expounding upon the meaning of the text to a roomful of men and only a handful of women. The majority of women have gone off to a women's class which, if true to norm, makes no pretense at scholarship. All too often, "uplifting but light" describes the menu for these classes.<sup>6</sup>

Is it true, as Hillis suggests, that Bible classes and literature often leave the impression that domestic activities are the totality of spiritual fulfillment for women? Some older women admit that "a lifetime of activities like church dinners had taken the place of spiritual growth."<sup>7</sup> Many younger women explain that

their busy schedules hinder time for Bible study. Jesus addresses this issue in Luke 10 during His visit with Mary and Martha.

## The Scriptures' Message

Perhaps you are familiar with this reminder of spiritual priorities. Martha may be applauded for her hospitality, but Mary's attentiveness to Jesus' words received commendation. Mary chose the "good part" when she took the opportunity to listen to Jesus (Luke 10:42). Nourishment that promotes spiritual maturity comes from Scripture (1 Peter 2:2).

Jesus visited Mary and Martha in Bethany. Luke wrote, "Martha welcomed Him into her house" (Luke 10:38). This suggests Martha was the homeowner and perhaps the older sister. Mary "also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving" (vv. 39-40). It appears that both sisters sat and talked with their guest, but Martha became sidetracked. According to birth-order literature, the oldest child tends to be conscientious, well-organized and somewhat critical.<sup>8</sup> Those of us in this category understand Martha's feeling of responsibility to provide for Jesus' needs. However, by focusing on the physical she was missing a spiritual feast.

The Greek imperfect verbs denote that Mary *continued* to listen to Jesus while Martha – instead of giving Him her full attention – perhaps *continued* to be distracted with the tasks of "much serving" (Luke 10:40). We can imagine Martha leaving Jesus' presence to check on the bread or cover the steaming vegetables. Maybe she went out to the garden, washed some dishes and set the table. Do you ever become distracted while studying His Word? Mary, on the other hand, *continued* listening to Jesus. R.C.H. Lenski described the scene:

The moment Jesus indicated that he had something to impart Mary turned from everything else to sit and to be absorbed in what he said. This natural, devoted, devout, complete attention to Jesus' Word stands through all the ages of the church as the true mark of

discipleship. To receive the doctrine of Jesus with a docile heart is better than any work, labor, sacrifice, or suffering. To close the ear, to turn the heart away, no matter what the cause, is bound to be fatal, for it shuts off the life stream on which our faith depends.<sup>9</sup>

Mary provides a model of attentive listening to the Word. Jesus was the Word who “became flesh” (John 1:14). Mary sat at His feet. This posture was not merely physical. In Scripture the phrase “[t]o be seated (passive aorist participle) at the feet” meant “to act as a pupil.”<sup>10</sup> Paul was brought up “at the feet of Gamaliel” and was taught according to the law of the fathers (Acts 22:3). Mary placed herself in the role of pupil and Jesus as teacher.

Although we are not in His physical presence, we have opportunities today to sit at Jesus’ feet through study and meditation on Scripture. But, like Martha, we can become distracted, trying to make time for the Word while taking care of daily tasks. Life pulls us away. It takes deliberate effort to make time for study. Paul encourages us to “serve the Lord without distraction” (1 Corinthians 7:35). We often need a reminder of what is important.

Jesus gives this reminder in Luke 10. As Martha worked she became impatient with Mary’s lack of assistance and asked Jesus, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me” (v. 40). Jesus’ answer must have surprised her. He affirmed Mary’s priority of listening and challenged, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (vv. 41-42).

First, Jesus doubled Martha’s name. Deity often did this to get someone’s attention. Notice the calls to Moses (Exodus 3:4), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:10), and Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:4). Next, Jesus gently rebuked Martha’s “anxiety-ridden entertaining.”<sup>11</sup> She was much too concerned with the details of serving. Jesus described Martha as “worried” (*merimnas*), referring to her mental distraction, and “troubled” (*thorubazo*), denoting external agitation.<sup>12</sup> Martha was stressed out mentally and physically. A gentle

reminder was necessary for Martha and continues for those of us with a “Martha streak.”<sup>13</sup>

I am reminded of an elderly woman visited by her preacher. She got up to offer him coffee, then to serve cookies, and again to get him a napkin. He gently chided, “Martha, I don’t want coffee, I don’t want cookies, and I don’t want a napkin. I want you to sit down and talk with me.” Guests are only as comfortable as the hostess. I’m sure Jesus would have preferred a sandwich on a paper plate instead of perfect pasta under pressure.

Martha was worried and troubled while the solution to her distress was right in front of her. She could have found relief simply by sitting at the feet of Jesus. He is the source of peace. The psalmist wrote, “I will hear what God the LORD will speak, For He will speak peace To His people and to His saints” (Psalm 85:8). Lenski observed that “anxiety and a troubled mind are corrected only by having Jesus substitute the one needful thing which then works calmness and quiet assurance from above.”<sup>14</sup>

During this precious hour, Martha’s mind was divided – *part* on the spiritual and *part* on the physical. Mary, however, chose to focus on the good *part* – the “one thing” needed (Luke 10:42). Martha had the same opportunity, but she missed it. We too may choose to emulate Martha’s troubled mind or Mary’s attentive listening. Which one provides peace?

## **The Maturity-Building Discipline of Bible Study**

The “good part” is spiritual nourishment found in the Word. Jesus said in Matthew 4:4, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Calling himself the Bread of Life, He urged, “He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and He who believes on Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Matthew 6:33 promises that if we “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” we will receive all the things we need. And regular feeding on Scripture builds faith in His ability to provide.

If we understand how important the Bible is to our lives, we will be motivated to study it. Adele Calhoun insightfully wrote:

The Bible is divine revelation. God's own word to us. It reveals who God is, who we are and why we are here. Through Bible study we gain insights into God, human nature and creation. Studying the Scriptures can equip, guide and reveal how to live in life-giving ways that deepen our friendship with God and others. Both Old and New Testaments encourage regular study, meditation, contemplation and memorization of God's Word. The benefits of Bible study are directly related to how open, attentive and obedient we are to what we read.<sup>15</sup>

The Bible explains how to have a happy, spiritually healthy life. It provides knowledge about God (John 14:9), answers to life's questions (2 Timothy 3:16-17), protection against Satan's temptations (Psalm 119:11; Ephesians 6:11), guidance in making right decisions (Jeremiah 10:23; Psalm 119:105), strength in trials of life (46:1), and a map for a blessed eternity (John 5:39). God provided the Scriptures – not just for religious leaders and Bible teachers, but for everyone to study (2 Timothy 2:15). Mary of Bethany was not an expert in spirituality. She was just hungry for the Bread of Life.

Mary's attentive listening required preparation. Anthony Fischetto, in *Transformed: Intimacy With God*, urges Christians to "Follow the Mary Factor," that is, "Mary sat at Jesus' feet. ... She mentally decided to listen, physically prepared herself to sit at Jesus' feet, which then prepared her spiritually to receive God's Word."<sup>16</sup> It's a matter of priority. Fischetto adds,

We can always take the time given to us by God and return a portion of it to him by spending personal time with him. Not just a token prayer, a quick reading of a Bible verse, or the busyness of church life, but a true commitment to the Almighty and a conscious decision to "Be still, and know that [He is] God" (Psalm 46:10).<sup>17</sup>

The following suggestions may help you prepare for Bible study. They were developed from Rosemary Whittle McKnight's ideas in her book *I Love Me, I Love Me Not*.<sup>18</sup>

(1) ***Make an appointment for personal time in the Word.*** Set your alarm 15 minutes early, or place the Bible next to your bed for nightly reading. Plan a refreshing study session during your lunch or break time. Arrive at your child's school 15 minutes early to read while you wait. Make a regular appointment to sit at Jesus' feet. He'll be there waiting for you.

(2) ***Have a plan for personal time in the Word.*** Choose a daily reading program or a devotional guide from a Christian publisher. Enjoy a topical study using a Bible concordance, topical Bible, pictorial Bible encyclopedia, etc. Consult your church library or Bible bookstore for good commentaries for textual study through a book of the Bible. Study for a class you are teaching or one you attend. Imagine what the quality of Bible classes would be if everyone came prepared. Take and review notes from sermons. The Bereans were commended for their personal study (Acts 17:10-11). I recommend Sue Crabtree's chapter titled "Bible Study" in *Woman to Woman*.

(3) ***Make use of idle moments for personal time in the Word.*** When your hands are busy and your mind is free (driving, cleaning, etc.), listen to recorded Bible readings or lectures. Place texts for memorizing above the kitchen sink, on the bathroom mirror or in your purse. Keep a small Bible handy to read while waiting for appointments.

Attentive listening to God's Word produces spiritual maturity. The writer of Hebrews urged Christians to "go on to perfection" (Hebrews 6:1). "Perfection," in the Greek here, means a complete or high level of maturity.<sup>19</sup> In his article, "Indications of Immaturity," Martel Pace explains:

The maturity that the writer desired for the Christians to whom he wrote was a capability to grasp and appreciate the exposition of truth on an advanced level. ... It is sad when men and women who have been

Christians for years are found to be unaware of spiritual realities which should have great meaning, appeal, and power for them.<sup>20</sup>

A high level of spiritual maturity is commanded, expected and attainable (1 Corinthians 2:6; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 4:12). It comes through Bible study.

## **Benefits of Mary's Attentive Listening: Faith, Love and a Memorial**

Attentive listening to the Word provides more than knowledge about God. It fosters love for Him with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind (Luke 10:27). Mary developed a deeper faith and love for Christ that showed in good works. We read about these in John 11-12.

Jesus made another trip to Bethany to raise dead Lazarus, the beloved brother of Mary and Martha (John 11:1-2, 11). As He came near the city, Jesus asked for Mary (vv. 28-30). One sister in my congregation pointed out, "Jesus craved Mary's fellowship!" She hurried to Him, fell at His feet, and expressed her faith in His power: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 32). When Jesus saw her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. Jesus wept (v. 35). Our compassionate Lord felt Mary's pain (Hebrews 4:15). He provided comfort for her as He always does for those who enjoy a special relationship with Him. This kind of relationship comes through listening to His Word.

After Jesus raised Lazarus, Mary demonstrated her love and gratitude (John 12:1-9). At the celebration dinner, she took a pound of expensive spikenard oil (worth 300 denarii, a year's wages, vv. 3, 5) and anointed Jesus' feet. She felt compelled to act, for her regular and attentive listening had given her unique insights into Jesus' mission. J. Ramsey Michaels notes,

Only Mary anticipates and grasps the human significance of Jesus' words, and she displays her love accordingly. Though Mary has not understood that Jesus

is going away in glory to the “one who sent him,” she at least understands that he is going away; and this for the time being is all that matters. Mary loves Jesus in his mortality, pouring out her love for him today because he may not be with her tomorrow. Here, if anywhere in the Bible, genuine human love is shown and defined.<sup>21</sup>

Mary accepted Jesus’ impending death, unlike the disciples later in the upper room (John 13). They objected to the news that He was about to leave them and to His act of washing their feet (vv. 4-8, 36-37; 14:5). Mary, however, had symbolically prepared for His burial by washing – and anointing – His feet. Washing and anointing the bodies of loved ones was a custom Jews always performed before burial. John 19:40 explains that Nicodemus brought spices to anoint Jesus’ body “as the custom of the Jews is to bury.”

Mary showed her devotion in Jesus’ living presence, and He defended her. When Judas complained that she “wasted” the fragrant oil and asked why it was not sold to help the poor, Jesus rebuked: “Don’t stop her. It was right for her to save this perfume for today – the day for me to be prepared for burial. The poor people will always be with you. But you will not always have me” (John 12:7-8 *ETRV*).

Mark’s account, which reveals that the dinner took place in the house of Simon the leper (Mark 14:3), gives a fuller description of Jesus’ rebuke:

Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her (Mark 14:6-9).

Jesus foretold that Mary of Bethany would be remembered. As Herbert Lockyer has beautifully stated, “The odor of Mary’s loving service has filled the whole world.”<sup>22</sup> Faithful attentiveness to His words created a legacy that still inspires readers. It fostered in Mary spiritual sensitivity and maturity. Lenski encouraged that we also choose “the one thing needful, the good part, i.e., the blessed, saving, soul-satisfying Word of Christ. Where this is chosen all else follows; where this is set aside and neglected all else is useless, empty, deceptive, vain.”<sup>23</sup>

Is Bible study a priority in your life? We make time to do the things we really want to do. Kelly Weaver, the young mother mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, desperately wanted her twins to be healthy, so she diligently followed her doctor’s instructions. Today she and Brandon remain committed to their children’s physical and spiritual welfare. They are making the time and effort required (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Babies are supposed to grow, especially spiritually. The Great Physician has given us instructions in His Word. Mary of Bethany attentively listened while she sat at Jesus’ feet. Through regular study of God’s Word, we too can learn about our Lord and Savior, develop a special relationship with Him, and become transformed into blessed, holy women of God.

## Reflection Questions

1. Satan tempts us with distractions. Name some things in your life that may seem virtuous but hinder attentive listening to God’s Word.
2. Discuss the special relationship between Mary of Bethany and Jesus.
3. Scripture is God’s revealed Word. Fischetto wrote, “When we abide in the Word of God daily through Bible study and meditation, our faith is transformed and grows deeper.”<sup>24</sup> What scriptures help you most in your Christian journey?

4. Specific Bible verses guide us toward spiritually healthy works such as marriage, parenting, handling finances, etc. List other life principles discussed in Scripture.
5. The psalmist described the godly: “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:2). Share methods for Bible study that work for you.

### **Spiritual Exercise**

Reading God’s Word is more effective when we spend time meditating (concentrating, thinking) on it (Psalms 1:2; 63:6; 77:12; 119:15, 23, 48, 148; 143:5). Spend 10 minutes with Psalm 1, writing down your thoughts about every sentence. Ask questions like: What is the psalmist saying? How does it apply to me? Throughout the week, think about the passage. Write down any additional thoughts.

