

The Feet of Jesus-the Place for Personal Necessity - Part 3

by Philip Bennett Power

Mary's haste to meet Jesus and her confidence in His power and love demonstrate the importance of bringing our sorrows to Him in times of need.

Scripture: John 11:25-26, John 11:31-33, John 11:35, John 11:40-41, John 11:43-44

Topics: "Faith And Trust", "Sorrow And Comfort"

Description

Philip Bennett Power preaches on the story of Mary falling at Jesus' feet in deep sorrow, expressing her belief in His power and love, and her regret that He was not there to prevent her brother's death. The sermon reflects on the human tendency to focus on 'ifs' and the importance of bringing our sorrows and true selves to Jesus, even in times of great agitation and perplexity. It emphasizes the need to recognize Christ in His entirety, with His power of sympathy and help, and to trust in Him fully, regardless of our shortcomings or doubts.

Transcript

"When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet and told Him--Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died!" John 11:32

When the wind agitates the surface of a lake, in whose placid waters are reflected the mountainsides in their strength, and the sky in its beauty, their images first become broken and confused, and finally disappear.

The real mountains are there--as strong as ever; and when the waters become smooth again, they will appear as they did before; but for a moment they are gone.

This is an apt image, in some respects, of what happens in our own spiritual lives. Circumstances arise which agitate us for a season--and all our tranquility seems gone; we are no longer ourselves, we do not act in harmony with the habit of our past lives. We are lacking to our best selves, and have to endure all the troubles which belong to an agitated state.

But in a true character, there are all the elements of restoration; the strong mountains are really there; they will re-manifest their existence as soon as the storm is past.

Here we come upon a scene of agitation and distress; and as is so often the case, precisely where we would not have expected to find it. We would have thought that Mary would have presented us with nothing but a picture of calm. Having seen her sitting at the feet of Jesus, when Martha was so disturbed, we would have prepared to take our lesson from her in such a scene as this--in the direction of calmness, and self-possession, and peace; but it is just here, as it is in so many instances in the teachings of God--we are led by ways which we know not, the teaching comes to us in a very different way from what we expected.

We have been taught by Mary's sitting--now let us learn from her falling at Jesus' feet.

Every verse of this narrative is full of teaching--its own distinctive teaching; but we shall confine ourselves to such thoughts as suggest themselves in immediate connection with the position in which we find Mary here.

We shall first note what immediately preceded Mary's going forth to meet Jesus; and then her words and her position at His feet.

When Martha called Mary secretly--she arose quickly, and without confiding to any of the attendant mourners the reason for her acting so suddenly and with such haste--she left the house. Those who mourned with her must have been astonished--but they were not long in finding out a probable cause for her conduct. She was, doubtless, seized with a paroxysm of grief, which could be relieved only at the tomb, by the nearest possible approach to the dead.

Here, as in the case of Jairus' daughter, we have a strong contrast between the many and the one--the impotence of the many--the omnipotence of the one. All that the minstrels and people could do in the one case, was to make a noise; all that they could do in the other case, was to go after the heart-wounded one to a grave; but in each case Jesus brought with Him life, for that which we can only mourn--He can restore.

Many Jews came to comfort Mary, "The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw that Mary got up quickly and went out. So they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to cry there." John 11:31

No doubt they were sincere in their desire to mitigate her sorrow--each had his own argument, his own aspect of comfort to present, or at least his own reason why sorrow should be assuaged. Perhaps there were even some, who knew the mystery of silence, and were able to sit still, and speak not a word, except such words as looks, and the mere consciousness of the presence of sympathy can utter. But they had evidently been able to do but little, for when Mary rose hastily to go forth and meet Jesus, they thought her grief had mastered her, and that she was going to vent it at the tomb.

There is something no doubt pleasing in the thought, that rays of human sympathy should converge from a wide circumference upon one focus of sorrow. It reminds us of our common humanity--that in the depths (whatever surface distinctions there may be) human kind are one--that as the poet says, "One touch of nature makes us all akin". And no doubt all sharing of each others joys and sorrows, will prove helpful so far to our rejoining some of the myriad threads of our humanity which are broken or cut in all directions. Still, sad thoughts connect themselves with the one in sorrow, and the many comforters. For what the heart craves in the depth of its sorrow--is not to spread itself out to many--but rather to gather itself in, and hold companionship with but few. Deep streams run in narrow water courses.

There is indeed a brawling noisy sorrow which from its very shallowness is heard here and there and everywhere--but it is different from what Mary had here.

Her heart, doubtless, sat loose to all the comforters around; and so was all the more ready to leap forth to Him who had her truest deepest sympathy, who, because He had in His keeping all the secret springs of her being--could comfort her indeed.

Now, while we would be far from undervaluing or casting off human sympathy, we cannot but feel conscious that it is well to sit loose to it. Or, let us put the matter in another form; we cannot but feel how little in the hour of our sorest need, it can do for us. It is precious in its place; but we shall remain unsatisfied if we have no more.

Mary knew of One who was superior to all all the others combined; and when He came near, she was ready immediately to leave all around, and go forth to Him. No doubt, the previous knowledge of the feet of Jesus was silently exerting its power. Those feet at which she had sat--had now approached her house; they were standing waiting for her, not very far off; she was going forth on no sentimental journey--they said she was going to the grave to weep there--but she was going not to the home of death--but to the Lord of life.

It is true they were right in one respect, she was going 'to weep;' but it was one thing to weep simply at a grave, it was another to do so before the Lord of life. We may weep before each--but which it is, makes a vast difference indeed.

But we are anticipating. What we desire for the reader is, not only that he should be visited by Jesus, in the time of his sorrow--but that when Christ comes to him--it should be as one well-known.

Many have made their first acquaintance with Jesus in this sad time; they are happy in having done so; but they are not the happiest of all. They are happier still, who have met him in sorrow--as a well-known friend.

And for this very reason among others, let us now like Mary sit at the feet of Jesus, so that He may come to us as a known friend in our sorrowing times, so that we may not have to say 'Who is this that is come--who is this that is calling us out of ourselves?' but, 'It is my friend Jesus, I will go forth at once to Him!'

And of how much--what a wonderful much can we dispense, if we have Christ Himself. Mary could leave all her friends--for Him. As Jesus had food to eat that His disciples knew not of--so Mary had a friend at hand, whose friendship was such as they knew not of.

If then in our times of sorrow and trial, we would not be perhaps helplessly dependent on mere human sympathy, let us strive so to sit at Jesus' feet, that His coming to us at these sad times may draw us to Him at once. However Jesus may choose to act for us, we must leave altogether with Him--only we may be sure that, if we know Him, and are ready when He calls for us to go forth to Him--that it will be always a leaving of a company of mourners--to go into the presence of the Lord of life!

"Supposing that she was going to the tomb to cry there." The many Jews had come to comfort. They recognized the deep need, which now however it seems, they are not able to supply. Mary's grief has overflowed their resources, and she apparently goes to the tomb to weep there.

These friends of Mary spoke according to the probabilities of the case, doubtless according to what under similar circumstances, they would have done themselves. They did not know that Mary had been called for by Jesus; nor if they had known it, could they have told how much was involved in it.

Those who do not know our intimate connection with Jesus--do not know our resources. Their thoughts end with the natural; they can go all the length to which that reaches--but not further.

To those comforting Jews, there was no comforting point beyond that grave of Lazarus--there was no alleviation beyond weeping there. The dead was beyond all reach--but the sorrow which mourned for him, might find a home at his grave. But whatever they said, Mary does not appear to have heeded it, one thought filled her mind, and quickened her steps--that was to get into the presence of the Lord!

And now Mary has hastened and come into the presence of Jesus, and what she does is to fall at His feet--to weep; and to cry that, had He been at Bethany--her brother would not have died.

What Mary said and did at those feet, is full of teaching to us.

And first let us look at who it is that thus hastens away, and cast herself down at the feet of Jesus.

It is Mary--the calm--the contemplative--the self-possessed; the still one, who sat at the feet, who is now in such haste.

Those whom we think are the calmest--are often capable of the greatest emotion, activity, and excitement, which we would have thought utterly foreign to their nature. We often judge people as to what they possibly can do or leave undone, by the aspect in which they habitually present themselves to us--but we do not know how vehemently and in what an opposite direction they may be moved by circumstances.

In Mary's case there seems to have been a mingling of the natural and the spiritual--of intense human feeling, and also true spiritual sensibility; she went forth to meet Jesus, with both Lazarus and Jesus occupying chief places in her heart.

Would Jesus have had it otherwise? Would He have had her violate all the feelings of human nature? Was He so jealous as not to leave any sympathy, even for mourners? Did He expect her to think of Him alone--when He called for her, and when He saw her hastening to His feet? No! Christ is no stifler of genuine emotions! He is the regulator of human emotion; He had no blame for Mary; He received her as she came; He mingled His tears with hers.

Let us be careful how we form too decided an opinion about some who appear to us somewhat abstracted, and contemplative, and separated from the wear and tear of ordinary life. It by no means follows that their natural feelings and emotions are dead--that they cannot feel themselves, and feel for others. We do not know what people are, or are capable of--until the circumstances fitted to try them, have occurred. When they do occur, we shall perhaps be surprised to find how full of emotion, or susceptibility to personal suffering, or how capable of sympathy such and such a person is.

Moreover let us never seek to be so contemplative, and enrapt, as to be above human joy or sorrow. While we are here in this world, God wills us to be men--true men, even as Jesus was. Rightly to show ourselves capable of human emotion, is an infinitely truer position than to be independent or incapable of it. Neither let us seek a place at 'the feet' with the idea of raising ourselves out from affliction. We may seek a place there selfishly, from, perhaps unknown to ourselves, a low motive as well as a high one; for

our poor hearts are liable to be deceived, and what is in itself very high motive, may be turned to a very low use; the thing may be the same--but its aim and end altogether different.

In this respect the emotion of Mary on the present occasion is very precious, and it is made doubly so by that of Jesus. Mary wept, the Jews were weeping, Jesus weeps also.

It is important to observe that He has no chiding for those tears, and that impassioned falling at His feet. He has chiding for unbelief; for He presently says to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (ver. 40.) It is not that He is so overcome with emotion, as not to discern anything faulty which may exist; it is that within the true limits of human sorrow, which He receives.

And it is our belief, that Jesus desires that sincere human feelings to be brought into contact with Himself.

What kind of religion is that which says, 'I will reverence You with the abstract--but I will keep from You with all that in which I most truly live, and move, and have my being?' That religion would not be the religion of our very selves--it would be unreal. Jesus would say, you are weeping about an earthly trial, a wound to your affections, a loss, a difficulty, a need; and you are not coming to Me; I am not in the reality of your daily life--but only in the creeds and abstractions of your spiritual thoughts.

It must be either because we have mistaken notions about Christ, or are not sure of Him--that we keep so aloof from Him--that we do not rise up hastily and run to Him, and fall at His feet in the passion of our souls, in the deep emotions of our life. If we knew Him as well as Mary did--we would do as she did also!

But before we part with Mary's haste, let us note two things:

(1) how she sped forth to the One to whom she could unbosom herself, as soon as she knew He was at hand;

(2) how quickly she left the many comforters for the One; that One being in Himself of more value than all the rest combined.

This speedy going forth was no mere experiment on Mary's part. From what she had heard from Christ, sitting at His feet--she knew that her sorrow would have a place in His heart; a secret sympathy existed between her soul and His, which did not between her and all the other mourners.

We must likewise learn, that there is no one to whom we can fully unbosom ourselves, but Jesus. All deep sorrow ramifies into strata below the surface soil of human sympathy. It gets into our spiritual being; it has other life connection with us, which none but He who is God can understand; and that we feel and know.

And in truth, though men do not always know it, that is why all mere human sympathy comes short. An unspiritual man may never know this, and so never seek for anything beyond the imperfect help of his fellow man; but even a spiritually minded man may not know it either. He knows it not theologically--but he does instinctively--an instinct of his being makes him seek Christ; and in that One he finds what all 'the many' could not supply.

Thus may it be with us in our deepest sorrowing times; may we feel that Jesus is able to penetrate into those depths of our being to which the sorrow reaches--and let us bring it to Him--just as it is. Let us not wait until it is toned down and moderated, and, as we would think, brought into a more seemly state for His presence; but let us come to Him with our sorrows--as we must with our sins--bringing them just as they

are.

Now let us inquire what Mary said when she fell at Jesus' feet.

We have no record of any formal approach, of any actual words of reverential acknowledgment; the one act of falling at her Lord's feet, combined within itself at once her reverence and grief.

And in truth what she said did the same. For in those words, "Lord if you had been here--my brother would not have died," she declared her belief in the power and love of that Lord, and her own bitter sorrow, that because He had not been on the spot--all was now hopelessly over, the beloved one had gone.

This--the saying of Mary at Jesus' feet--must now occupy our attention for a little while.

We observe that the two sisters, of wholly opposite characters, both say the same thing, "Lord if you had been here--my brother would not have died."

No doubt this had been the theme both of the thought, and conversation of the sisters ever since their brother expired.

There had been anxious waiting ever since that touching message was sent off by the sisters to Jesus, saying, "Lord, behold he whom you love is sick!" Many a time, perhaps, they went out alone or together to look in the direction from which the welcome footsteps were to be expected; and questioned within their hearts, or one with the other, 'Will He come soon--why do His feet tarry, when the one He loves is sick unto death?' It may be that, they watched the ebbing tide of their brother's life, and asked each other how long he could hold out, and if he could do so until the Lord would come. But the Lord did not come. Weary hours stole on--but there was no sign of the One who could heal, and at last, the healing time had past, the death time came, yes, burial too. And not until all was over in the fullest sense--did Jesus come.

It is no wonder then, that each of the sisters used the same exact words when the Lord appeared; for their minds, and doubtless their words had been running in the self-same groove.

But these words are full of teaching for ourselves. And first let us note how each said, "My brother." There is something very touching in the death of Lazarus being not only a family loss--but an individual one.

The family was made up of two 'mys.' Martha speaks of Lazarus as if he had been wholly hers, and Mary does the same; with each of them it is, "My brother." As the love had been in life, so is it spoken of in death.

Here we are brought into somewhat of a strait, for the two remarks which we wish to make seem as though they contradict one the other.

Happy is that family where each has such property in the other, that the very habit of thought leads to the use of the word MY.

Unhappy is that family where there is nothing but a series of "mys," where the meaning of "our" is not known as well as that of "my."

We doubt not that the 'our' as well as the 'my' was known and recognized, and that the power of it was lived in, in the family at Bethany; but now human grief was having its own way, and as is its custom, it concentrated the mind on personal feelings, and to some extent excluded the thought of others. And, in

truth, that is one of the perils of grief--that nursing of it in our own bosom--that hugging of it to ourselves alone--that unwillingness to part with any of it, and to see that others are shipwrecked in it as well as ourselves.

Now let us contrast this 'my' of Mary, and also of Martha, with the 'our' of Jesus.

Jesus knew that Lazarus was dead. He also knew what individual love was, for we are told that He loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus; they are spoken of not as the family at Bethany--but one by one; but when He speaks to His disciples about the death sleep, He says not, "MY friend Lazarus has fallen asleep," but "OUR friend Lazarus has fallen asleep."

Happiest is that family where many 'mys' combine into many 'ours'; the two--each occupying its own place, giving the ideal of the 'family' in sorrow.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." There is something very touching in that confidence, as there is in all the great confidences of love. Jesus must have felt it so. He saw His power over disease acknowledged; His love so reposed in, that it was thought impossible that it could allow any harm to happen to those who were loved; no note whatever is taken of what the virulence of the disease had been--had He only been there--all would have been well.

And Jesus, we may be sure received that confidence as it was meant--the weight of the family's sorrow was not laid on Him in vain, especially when He knew that He could have been there--that He had purposely delayed.

One would have thought that Jesus would have been cut to the heart at hearing such words as these, when He knew well that He might have averted all this sorrow; and that it was owing to purposed delay on His part that Lazarus had died. But He was quite calm. We see that He was, by what happened between Him and Martha, when she used these exact same words; and when He replied to them.

We see here plainly how some of love's true thoughts, may however be only surface ones. Love is not the less real because it is shallow in the reach of its thought; it may be untrue in its reasoning, and ill-informed as regards its knowledge, and yet be sterling and real in itself.

Now confidence--the confidence of love, even with a mistake, may often be better than suspicion with accuracy and correctness.

Our mistakes concerning Christ are our ignorance; and there may be much ignorance without guilt; but our lack of trust and confidence, no matter what form it assumes, is our sin. There are simple people making great mistakes, who occupy a higher place in the kingdom of God than wiser ones, who are cold and calculating, and seeking to be in their religion, we might almost say 'mathematically correct'.

God is tender and patient with honest mistakes. If He were not, where would we be in our daily service, or our daily life.

"Lord, IF you had been here, my brother would not have died."

And He might have been--but she did not know that; she did not know what had kept Him--we can scarcely speculate, as to how exactly she would have addressed Him, if she had known.

There are many things which it is well for us not to know, concerning which, if we did know all, a strange storm might arise in our minds.

The fact is--we are surrounded with "ifs" in life, they are a continual element of vexation and perplexity; it would be an amazing source of peace and comfort if we could get rid of them altogether. This word "if" has had power to distract, to set up all sorts of speculation, to open many a door to unbelief, to aggravate the circumstances of many a trial.

We sometimes conjure up all sorts of possible, and at times, impossible "ifs;" and the one as vexing as the other. We have to do with things not as they might have been--but as they have been, or as they are; most of our "ifs" are little better than suggestions of better arranged providences, as though WE could have fitted matters in much better, than has been the case.

In truth, many of our vexing and disquieting, and all our despairing "ifs" have a depth far below what we imagine; they go down into discontent with God's providence. It is not suggested that this was the case with Mary here--but it surely is so with us.

And as in Mary's case, the "if" fixed her mind entirely on the past; so in our case it does the like, hiding out the restorations and life which may be even at the very threshold.

Martha seems to have passed altogether beyond her sister in this matter; for she immediately qualifies her "if," by a "but". "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

The "if" can never be safely used, except with the quickly following "but."

And now mark how Mary came to be at Jesus' feet. "When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet." When we saw her last, she was sitting at those feet, now she has fallen at them.

Such are the vicissitudes of the spiritual life. Where we are found sitting today, we may be found fallen tomorrow. The place of our rest may be that of our struggle; that of our peace, may become that of our agony.

The fiercest throes of the soul--have been experienced at the feet of Jesus. They have not been felt in the conflicts with the tempter--but in heart sorrows with our greatest friend. It is indeed a wonderful sight to see a calm spirit--calm in the teaching learned at Jesus' feet, cast down there in bitter agony.

Whatever may be our spiritual destiny; with whatever shaking of soul we are to be tried--only let it be at the feet of Jesus. Whatever down- castings of soul I am to experience, only let them be there--there Mary wept; and Jesus wept too.

In Mary, the anguish of grief blocked out for the moment, the comfort she might have had. To weep in her Lord's presence, seemed all that she now could do. This was the only comfort she had, it was the natural effect of a natural feeling; and just shows us how little human nature can do for us in our deep trial times.

The sympathy of feeling in Jesus was recognized. His power of help was clouded; in a word the natural was apparent, the supernatural was veiled. The time was one of great shaking of faith, and human reasoning was so in the ascendant, that faith had little place given it for working at all.

We should learn from the shortcoming of this sinner at Jesus' feet; we must seek in our trial times to recognize Christ in His entirety--His power of sympathy and help. It is by looking at Jesus in the perfect

balance of His nature and perfections, in their fullness, that we find peace.

No doubt it is often very little we can do when we get to the feet of Jesus, under circumstances similar to Mary's. We too are so agitated that we can only fall down and weep; we also have a clouded and shortened vision; we are encompassed with perplexities and "ifs;" yes, those "ifs" occupy our thoughts more than anything else. Well! be it so; yet to those feet let us come, with our agitations and our perplexities, if we have nothing else to bring--but our very selves.

For after all, that is the great point--the bringing of our very selves. Let us not wait to get more faith, or the power of doing better before Jesus--it is ourselves that He wants.

It is quite true, better things might have been expected of us than we can show when we get there; we may not be able to act in a way at all proportioned to our advantages and opportunities. We may give cause for rebuke as Philip did, "Have I been so long with you, and have you not known me Philip?" but all this must be put down as so much loss and shame, and even with the loss and shame--we must be found in our great agitations at the feet of Jesus.

There indeed must we go; and may we however unconsciously, yet so act in sorrow as to draw others with us into the presence of the Lord, and make them witnesses of His work.

We know not what wonderful things may be shown to those who are brought into the presence of the Lord. Perhaps all that we on our part can show is sorrow, and poor weak faith. Some 'ifs' and small outputtings of sorrow--but we know not what He will do. Many may be brought to believe through our deep woe.

Setting aside, however, all else that has been advanced, great will be the profit of these lines, if they induce any believer in his time of agitation, when the still waters are broken up, to go just as he is, and cast himself with all his perplexity, his shortcomings of faith, and everything else--at 'the feet of Jesus.'

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