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## Bethany - The Lord's Thought For His Assembly

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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The upper room of the first chapter of the Acts corresponds with Bethany, the "house of figs", and Bethany with the upper room. We are going to take up that thought and, as the Lord helps us, follow it out to greater fullness. What is before us is the Lord's desire to have at the end what He had at the beginning - to have in His people, spiritually, that which He Himself constituted by His own presence at the beginning: and if I were asked to put into a word what I feel the object of the Lord to be, I should say, speaking symbolically, that it is 'Bethanies'. For Bethany, to my mind, most fully corresponds to the Lord's thought: He would have things on the basis of Bethany, constituted according to Bethany, and have His universal Church represented locally by 'Bethanies'. Now I am going to ask you to look at seven passages where Bethany is mentioned.

### **The Lord Recognised and Received**

Luke 10:38. *"Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village (do not forget that villages represent local assemblies): and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. (You know whose the house was now, who was the head of that house.) And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said..."*

Now here, in this first mention of Bethany, we have one or two things which in principle represent that Church, and that assembly, and that house, which the Lord has His heart set upon, and I fasten at once upon one word: "And a certain woman named Martha *received* him into her house." The word "received" is the key-word to this whole thing, and it represents immediately a great difference. It is a discriminating word, a differentiating word.

One remembers that it was said concerning His coming from glory to this earth: "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11). We shall remember that He said of Himself: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heaven have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). And if it really did break upon us with anything like its real meaning, when we reflect as to who it is of whom the first is said, and who is saying the second, it would leave us astonished. Here is the Creator of all, the Proprietor of all, the Lord of heaven and of earth; the Lord who has greater right to everything and anything than any other being in the universe; the Lord, for whom and through whom all things were made - and He came and had not where to lay His head in the world of His creation, in the realm of all His sovereign rights. He was not received, but, as truly expressing the attitude even of His own kinsfolk to Him, He represented them as saying: "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and take his inheritance. And they took him, and cast him forth..." (Matthew 21:38,39).

But here we read: "*And a certain woman named Martha received him...*" "My church" - "My church" - His assembly, His spiritual house, is the place where He is gladly received and finds His rest. It is His place, *His* place in a world which rejects Him; it is the place where He is recognised. Do you notice that when assemblies are being scattered over the face of the earth it is always *that* which is the beginning of an assembly? They "receive" the word. Pentecost was that: "*Then they that received his word...*" (Acts 2:41). At Philippi, "*a certain woman named Lydia... whose heart the Lord opened, to give heed unto the things which were spoken by Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there*" (Acts 16:14,15). That is the beginning of the assembly - it is like that everywhere. It is a spiritual perception issuing in an open-hearted reception. That is the first thing which befeatures His Church: "received". It is the giving Him a place, *the* place of honour.

Now that is very simple, but it represents much to the Lord, and it carries us a long way, because it represents something more than the Lord coming just to be a sojourner in the midst. It represents that the Lord has got a footing, a foothold, a place which provides Him with that which is necessary to Him to secure all His rights universally. Let me illustrate.

You remember the tragic story in II Samuel 15, of the rejection of David in the usurping of Absalom. It is a pathetic story - David driven away from his place; leaving, passing out of, the realm of his rights. One and another accompany him, and Zadok the priest brings the ark of God with him, but David turns to Zadok and says: "Carry back the ark of God into the city: if I shall find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me again, and show me both it, and his habitation" (vs.25). The inference is: 'When I come back, I shall have in the city, in the place of my rejection, that which is sympathetic with me, to which I can come back. I shall not come back a stranger; I shall not come back to nothing; I shall not come back to find no place; I shall not come back and find there is no home for me: I shall come back to something that is one with me. Zadok, you are one with me; yes, you wanted to come out with me - this is a perfect sympathy. Now go back into the city, and when I come back I shall come back to something that is with me'

And that is the principle here. The assembly here provides the Lord with that in which He is now, by His Spirit. It declares that He has a foothold in a rejecting world, and He is coming back to *that*. He will have something to come back to which is on His side and which, being on His side, will provide Him with the ground for re-establishing His universal rights, just as Zadok did for David.

And that is why the Lord would have His Church here in assemblies, local assemblies, over the face of the earth. They are testimonies to His rights, in a world where those rights are disputed and disowned; and they stand there to say: 'Yes, His rights are the supreme rights in this world, not the

rights of the usurper', and they maintain that testimony. When He comes back, they are to be the means, the instrument, of His recovery of those rights which have been disputed and from which He has been driven out. There is a good deal bound up with receiving the Lord. He is coming back to His own because He is already there in possession.

You understand why the Devil is always out to destroy, if possible, the local expression of the Church; to destroy the little companies of the Lord's people who are living in heavenly union and fellowship with Him. It is because they represent His rights - the Lord's rights - and they are there all the time disputing by their very presence the rights of the usurper. The ark of the testimony is there; and while that is there, on the side of the Lord, the usurper has not universal sway. He knows that it represents that his kingdom is defeated, is menaced, and it is a constant thorn in his side. And so, if possible, he will quench it, break it, divide it, do anything to get rid of that local expression which is according to Christ and in which He is. That is what the Church ought to be as locally represented; that is what every believer ought to be here on earth: a foothold to the Lord in this earth, a testimony to His sovereign lordship and right. To *receive* the Lord provides Him with such a foothold and such a testimony.

And so we see that the very first step as related to Bethany is of the greatest significance. It represents a principle of tremendous importance. The Church is constituted, to begin with, upon the simple principle that *Christ has found a place*: amidst all the range of rejection He has found a place.

### **His Heart's Satisfaction**

Now we continue with the passage: "... *received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.*" Literally the words are: "who also took her seat at the feet of Jesus and went on listening to His word." "Took her seat at His feet and went on listening." It was that which irritated Martha: she *went on* listening. What Martha really said to the Lord was in the same tense, the imperfect. When she came to the Lord she said: "*Dost thou not care that my sister doth KEEP ON LEAVING me to serve alone?*" "Keep on leaving me" - because she "kept on listening"!

What is this? Well, it is that which provides the Lord with what He most desires. It is the heart satisfaction of the Lord that is represented by this. The heart satisfaction of the Lord was found in what Mary did. It is here that we understand the meaning of Bethany. You go over to Matthew 21, and you will find the story of the fig tree. Jesus is moving between Jerusalem and Bethany; He has been into Jerusalem and has seen things in the temple, and His heart has been pained, shot through with the agony of disappointment. He has looked round upon all things, and has said nothing, and has gone back to Bethany. In the morning, as He is in the way, being hungry and seeing a fig tree, He comes up to it, to see whether perhaps it is bearing fruit. But He finds none, and says, "Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever"; and as they return, the disciples mark that the fig tree is withered and dead; they point out the fact.

Now that fig tree, as we know, was bound up with Jerusalem, and was a type of Judaism as it then was. The heart disappointment which the Lord had met in the temple was one with His heart disappointment in coming hungry to the fig tree and finding no fruit; the two things are one. That order of things, then, passes out of His realm of interest; Judaism goes out for the rest of the age - "Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever" (Gr. "unto the age"). It cannot satisfy Him, and it goes; it is a withered tree providing the Lord with nothing.

But when that heart disappointment is felt so acutely, and registered in that way by Him, He goes to Bethany, and Bethany means "the house of figs". Not in the temple, and not in Jerusalem, does the

Lord find His satisfaction, but in Bethany. That is why He was always going there. Heart satisfaction for Him now was not in the cold, lifeless, formal religious system of the day, but in the living, throbbing, warm atmosphere of the Bethany home. He always knew that, while His words were rejected in Jerusalem, they would be accepted there, and listened to eagerly, and there would always be someone who would 'keep on' listening.

I am impressed with Acts 2; it says that after Pentecost those who believed "continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching" (vs.42). You see, there the Church came in, and that is its feature: "they continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching." We are so used to those words that they do not seem to convey very much to us. Will you bear with a simple practical way of seeking to apply it?

In these pages certain things are being said. Now you will read them, and you will go your way, and perhaps you will remember them for a certain length of time; perhaps for a long time you will remember Bethany. Mention of Bethany will bring back something - certain things that you have read. You may speak of this message as a more or less good one, an interesting message, or something like that. What a difference between that and your going away and 'continuing stedfastly in the teaching'! You must yourself interpret this, and say to yourself: 'Now what does it mean for me to continue stedfastly in that?'

The word really is 'persisting'. "They *persisted* in the apostles' teaching". There is all the difference between persisting in the teaching, and going away and saying: 'Well, that was a very nice message'. 'Persisting' represents the practical, positive application of the heart to the truth, and that constitutes His Church; it is where that which comes from Him is received and the whole heart, the whole life, is given to it. There is *abandonment* to it.

And that was probably what Martha did not like. Mary was abandoned to it, she was given to it; and that is what the Lord is seeking. I wonder what would be the result if we took that attitude toward every word of Divine truth that came to us. When I think of the mountains of truth that have been built up, I cannot help asking the question: 'What is the percentage of real application to that truth on the part of those who hear it?' It was because those at the beginning took such a practical attitude toward the things which they heard, and persisted in them, that you had the effectiveness there. They did not go away and say: 'What a wonderful sermon Peter preached today!' No, they persisted in the apostles' teaching.

That is what the Lord wants. That is what satisfies His heart. Mary took her seat at His feet and went on listening to His word, and that satisfied His heart when all else disappointed Him. Heart satisfaction must be a feature of the life of the Lord's people; and heart satisfaction to Him is just this, that we hang upon His word, we appraise it rightly, we regard it as the supreme thing. The assembly must be the "house of figs" for the Lord.

### **Adjusted Service**

Next let us look at Martha. "*But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said...*" The Greek is very strong: it means that she walked up to Him and involved Him in this. It implies that she regarded Him as responsible, and if she had said all that was in her mind, she would have said: 'You are responsible for this, You are involved in this, and it is up to You to put it right.' That is what is implied by the original words here - regarding Him as the one involved in it, and He could if He would, and He ought to, put it right. It implies that she burst out. She had been bottling this thing up, and at last, able to contain it no longer, she went up to Him and burst out: "*Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me.*"

Now I want you to get the force of the situation, and it will help you with Martha. We must understand Martha's mood and position. "Cumbered about much serving" hardly conveys to us what really was the situation. We get from the translation an altogether imperfect impression, I think, of exactly how things were. The Greek word here is a word which means "was distracted", "pulled in different directions". Probably her anxiety showed in her face. And what was the anxiety over? Many household cares, perhaps many dishes; preoccupations of all kinds. And the Lord said to Martha: 'Martha, you are bothered about all sorts of secondary considerations; you have got more than you can handle. There is but one thing that is really necessary -'.

You are beginning to understand the situation now, are you not? It was simply that there was necessary an adjustment of things on the part of Martha, so that what was most important should have its place. It was not that the Lord was out of sympathy with Martha's providing them with a meal, but He saw that she was causing this meal business to become such an elaborate and extensive thing as to be altogether out of proportion, and to put the more essential things into a place much less than the non-essential.

Yes, a meal may be right, but oh, let us put things in their right proportion. Let us see to it that temporal things do not overwhelm spiritual. Do not let us become so anxious and distracted about the passing things that the spiritual things are eclipsed. For the one thing which ought to be made to keep all the other things in their right places - they are all right in their places - is the thing which comes from the lips of the Lord.

You see, it is a matter of proportion, it is a matter of where you are placing the most emphasis. It is a matter of whether you are allowing the things of this life so to absorb, and to occupy, and to draw you round with anxiety, that the greater things are not getting a chance. And we all agree now, we have no more quarrel with the Master over Mary, when we see it like that. What was necessary was that there should be an adjustment of things: so that, while these other matters had a place, and a right place, they were *in* their place and in their own measure; whilst the supreme things were allowed to predominate and were not submerged in those lesser matters which, after all, are not the abiding things.

Now, that was the whole situation. In the House of God, the thing that matters more than all our business, all our feverish activities to do a thousand and one things of Christian work - the one thing that matters is getting to know the Lord, and giving the Lord a chance to make Himself known. Feverish activities so often, in what is called 'the church', exclude the voice of the Lord, shut Him out; it is all what we are doing, and so little of what He is getting a chance to say. The place that satisfies Him is the place of adjustment to the supreme things.

Well, that is Martha.

### **Precious Ointment Poured Forth**

Now we turn for the fourth thing to Matthew 26:6-13. It is the same village, and now the woman with her "*alabaster cruse of exceeding precious ointment*". The incident speaks to us in the first instance of the recognition of the worth of the Lord Jesus. The recognition of the *worth* of the Lord Jesus. All who looked on, as good as said: 'He is not worth it'; that is what it amounted to. 'He is not worth it.' Of course they would not have put it like that. She recognised His worth - that He was worth the 'exceeding preciousness'. It was the exceeding preciousness of Christ that was in view here, as something recognised. That, I think, is the main feature. It is a feature of Bethany, it is a feature of

the upper room, it is a feature of "My church". It is a feature of the Lord's assembly, it is a feature of the people who are after His own heart: the recognition of His exceeding preciousness, His exceeding worth; that there is nothing too costly to lay at His feet. *"Unto you therefore which believe he is precious (is the preciousness)"* (1 Pet. 2:7).

Now, that is very simple, and yet again it is a thing that draws forth the deep appreciation of the Lord Jesus. It is again a thing which gives feature to a very much beloved village. In other words it is a thing which makes His assembly of great value to Him, that there His worth is recognised, and He is appreciated and appraised at His true value. That must mark the house of the Lord. It is a feature that must be developed more and more. It is a thing to which we must attend, that we have a ready and an ever-growing recognition of the preciousness and worth of the Lord Jesus. Oh, how different this is from the merely formal church system! We can hardly say that the outstanding feature of that is a true heart-appreciation of the worth and of the value of the Lord Jesus. Where that appreciation is, you have the assembly; where it is not, whatever else you may have of ornate and elaborate presentation, you have not got the assembly, it is not the place of His delight.

I think I see something else here. The brokenness of the cruse brings out into expression the preciousness of the ointment. It is the 'vessel of fragile clay' which, being broken, makes possible the manifestation and expression of the glories of Christ. While that cruse is whole, strong, and sound in itself, something which you would look at and take account of in itself; something that would cause you to say: 'That is a beautiful vase, that is a wonderful piece of alabaster'; - you are not getting at the secret. We may take account of men, as splendid intellects, splendid men, wonderful preachers and so on - be occupied with the vase, the cruse - and the other be sealed, be hidden; but when the cruse is broken, shattered, then you get at the tabernacle secret of the glory of Christ.

You see it in Paul. I suppose Saul of Tarsus was a wonderful bit of alabaster intellectually, morally, religiously. He tells us that he was; he tells us all that he was, all that he gloried in and that men looked at and no doubt praised; but he was smashed and it is no longer Saul, and it is no longer Paul, but it is the beauty and glory of Christ. The fragrance of Christ comes out when the cruse is broken.

And, beloved, it is just like that in our experience. The Church, the true Church, has been allowed to be shattered, and shattered again, and the members individually are so often allowed to be broken and broken again; but has it not proved through history that, for the Church and for the individual, the breaking, the shattering, the smashing, has brought about an expression of the glories of Christ in a wonderful way? It is just like that. We go through a new experience of being broken - we put it in other ways sometimes and say we are being brought more deeply into the death of Christ, coming into a fresh experience of the Cross: however we may put it, it means breaking, it means the breaking of the cruse - but believe me, beloved, it means a fuller expression and knowledge of the glory of Christ, and it will bring us to a new appreciation of Him. We shall discover Him in the time of our brokenness. And in the same way the Church passes through the way of the Cross, but comes by the breaking to the worth of the Lord Jesus.

### **The Power of His Resurrection**

We pass to John and the well-known chapter 11. Here is Bethany again in view, and this time it is the raising of Lazarus which comes before us. We will not go through the whole story and take its details, but simply come swiftly to its one conclusion at the end. Bethany, in this instance, becomes the scene, the sphere, of the manifestation of resurrection power, resurrection life. There are many other things here. There is a wonderful expression of love; there is a wonderful expression of

fellowship here in this chapter. Far away from Bethany the Lord said to His disciples: "*Our friend Lazarus is fallen asleep*". "Our friend"; not "My friend", but "our friend". You see, it is fellowship. "*Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.*" It is love. All these are features of Bethany; but the outstanding feature here is the manifestation of His resurrection, the power of His resurrection, resurrection life.

And here again Bethany is an illustration of the Church that He is building. We know this from Ephesians, the 'Church Epistle', as we call it. We very soon come to our being "quickened... together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5). The Church is the vessel in which the power of His resurrection is displayed; and here again we not only testify to the fact, to the doctrine, but we have to apply the test, that the assembly according to the mind of the Lord is that in which His resurrection power and life are displayed.

Now, I know, when things like that are said, so often there is that vacant feeling that remains: 'Yes, we know it *ought* to be so, just as we ought to be crucified with Christ; we know we ought to be risen with Christ, and it is quite true that we ought to know the power of His resurrection, and His resurrection life'. That is said again and again, but we leave it there. The point is: how is it to be?

Now, we have to recognise that the Lord has brought His Church into being for the specific purpose of displaying the power of His resurrection, and we should dedicate ourselves unto the Lord for that very end. That is the way: in recognising that the object, the very object of our being in that Church, of that Body, is that He might display in us His resurrection power and life. We, recognising that, have a definite understanding with our Lord that we are consecrated to Him; now our responsibility ends there, if it is from our hearts, and the Lord will begin His work.

We shall not be able to raise ourselves any more than we can crucify ourselves, but we must recognise that the Lord's dealings with us are with that in view. In order to display the power of His resurrection, He will very often have to take the attitude toward us of letting things get well beyond all human power to remedy or save, of allowing things to go so far that there is no other power in all the universe that can do anything whatever to save the situation. He will allow death, disintegration, to work, so that nothing, nothing in the universe is of any avail, except the power of His resurrection.

We shall come to the place where Abraham came, who became the great type of faith which moved right into resurrection: "He considered his own body now as good as dead" (Rom. 4:19). That is the phrase used by the apostle about Abraham: "as good as dead". And Paul came into that: "We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). Whatever else men may be able to do in the realm of creation, they stop short when death has actually taken place; they can do no more. Resurrection is God's act, and God's alone. Men can do very many things when they have got life, but when there is no life it is only God who can do anything. And God will allow His Church and its members oft-times to get into such situations as are altogether beyond human help, in order that He may give the display, which is His own display, in which no man has any place to glory.

So said the Lord Jesus: "*This sickness is not unto death, but for THE GLORY OF GOD, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.*" Glorified! We have dedicated ourselves to that course of things - that is, we have dedicated ourselves to a line of human despair; but how slow we are to accept it in its outworking. When things get to a desperate situation, we kick so much and think that all has gone wrong. It may be just going right for the Lord! Oh, yes, it is desperate; that consideration does not take away from the desperateness of it, the awfulness of it; but if it is going to provide the Lord with His supreme opportunity to raise His pre-eminent testimony, then it is right - that is, it will be right in

its issue.

When at last, in eternity, we read the story of the Church, which is His Body, and see all that it really did come through, we shall have to confess that no human institution, no man-made thing, could have survived, could have gone through that which the saints went through. When it is understood in the light of eternity and appraised by true spiritual standards, we shall say that none but God Almighty could have achieved that, could have brought it through: that it has undoubtedly become the vehicle of the expression of "the exceeding greatness of his power" (Eph. 1:19); and that is to say a great deal. If "the exceeding greatness of his power" is necessary to this, well, that says much for what we have to be brought out of, doesn't it? If "the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:25), what must "the exceeding greatness of his power" represent?

Well, that is in resurrection; as you know, the words are connected with that: "the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to that working of the strength of his might which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead" (Eph. 1:19,20). That is "to us-ward who believe". Now the Church, the Bethany testimony, is to be a testimony to the power of His resurrection, and if His methods with us are making that necessary, then let us take encouragement and comfort from the fact that we are thus to be a true expression of what He desires of His Church.

### **Celebrating His Victory**

We pass from chapter 11 of John to chapter 12. *"Jesus therefore six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus raised from the dead. So they made him a supper there: and Martha served"* (evidently she had not gathered, from the Lord's words to her, that service was wrong; she is still serving - it is all right now); *"but Lazarus was one of them that sat at meat with him. Mary therefore took a pound of ointment of spikenard, very precious, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment."*

Here we have the feast, and the feast has several elements. One, represented by Mary and her action, speaks of worship. Once again, it is the appreciation of Christ that is in view. That is worship. Worship - according to God's thought - is always simply the appreciation of the Lord Jesus; bringing up before God the sweet odour of a heart-appreciation of His Son. That may sound simple, but worship in its purest essence is what we think of the Lord Jesus, expressed to the Father. That is worship. The assembly is for that. Bethany speaks of that.

Martha - yes, Martha served. But it is adjusted service. She is still serving, but it is all right; there is no rebuke now. There is no circling round of her face with anxiety now; she is not drawn around with care: she is serving in a resurrection house. Here is adjusted service, and service in the Lord's house is quite according to His mind when the service is in fellowship with, and in right proportion to, the worship. There is an adjustment between the sisters now, you see. They were disjointed before, because things were ill-proportioned and out of place; now the adjustment has been made and they are just getting on constantly together. It is adjusted service.

Lazarus sat at meat, and of course he is the principle of life, resurrection life. That, again, is a mark of the Lord's spiritual house. So we have worship, adjusted service, resurrection life.

Yes, but there is always some sinister thing not far away: "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" When you get the assembly just as the Lord wants it you will always find that the Devil is lurking very near. That may be a compliment to the assembly, for anything that the Devil does not cast his eye on jealously will surely not be that which is satisfying



the heart of the Lord. But it is always like that. Just begin to get something that is according to the Lord's heart, and you find a sinister thing begin to circle round with a view to destroying that worship, to divert that appreciation of the Lord. It becomes a feature of the very assembly itself, that the Devil jealously casts his eyes upon what the Lord is getting, and would have that for himself.

You see, the Church is that which brings to the Lord Jesus what He ought to have, and from eternity the Devil has been out to rob Him of that, and he will do it in the assembly if he can, because the assembly is that in which the Lord does get what His heart is set upon.

### **Outward and Upward**

Now we close by noting the last thing in Luke 24:50-52.

*"And he led them out until they were over against Bethany: and he lifted up his hand, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy."*

Three words: "led out", "blessed", "carried up": out with the Lord, in His place apart; under His blessing; and linked with Him in heaven - to use Paul's words, "made... to sit together with him in the heavenlies."

That is Bethany, that is the Church, that is what the Lord wants to have in the life of His people today.

Go back over Bethany again and just allow your heart to exercise itself on these things, and seek very definitely that the Lord shall have in you just these features which are according to His own mind. And what we do individually, let us seek to do in those fellowships, those assemblies, with which we are connected, that they shall be true Bethanies, the village-expression of the great city of God, the Heavenly Jerusalem.