

A Mary Spirit

*Create in me a clean heart, O God;
and renew a right spirit within me.*

Psalm 51:10 (KJV)

I've always dreamed of being much more than I am. More organized, more disciplined, more loving...more "much more," if you know what I mean! Each January I set out on a new self-improvement program.

This year I'll get in shape.

This year I'll keep my house clean.

This year I'll send out birthday cards. On time.

This year—really—I'll be the loving, forgiving, obedient woman of God

I long to be instead of the willful, stubborn, disobedient Christian I sometimes see staring back at me in the mirror. All noble goals. And truth be told, I am much more at peace when my house is clean. And I believe that if you really love people, you ought to care enough to send the very best—or at least one of those ninety-nine-cent cards from Wal-Mart! And I know that genuine happiness only comes from living close to God and obeying Him. I really do want to be different. I want to be changed.

As the saying goes, "There's a skinny woman inside me just struggling to get out." Unfortunately—as the saying continues—"I can usually sedate her with four or five cupcakes."

Working toward these noble goals leaves me with a cupboard full of half empty vitamin bottles, several pairs of slightly worn running shoes, and enough cleaning products to Lysol a small third-world country. Not to mention a shelf filled with dust-covered devotionals.

Is that true for you too?

Maybe you've discovered, as I have, that most of your New Year's resolutions have little effect on day-to-day life except to add a burden of guilt and a feeling of failure. Continually striving, yet never arriving. Hoping, praying to be different, only waking up to find you're not as far along as you'd hoped to be. Sometimes feeling like you're right back where you started—again!

I know. I've felt that way too.

In fact one of those discouraging moments prompted me to write this book.

LEARNING FROM MARY AND MARTHA

It all began about seven years ago, with two sisters I'd met in the Bible—Mary and Martha of Bethany.

I'm a pastor's wife and—at the time—was the mother of two almost teenagers, so my life was busy and often crazy. There was so much to do and so little time. And while I tended toward drivenness, my heart longed for intimacy with God. Maybe that's why I was drawn to take a new look at the story that had intrigued me for years. Luke 10:38–42 reads:

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

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

After hearing several hundred sermons on these two women, I assumed the meaning was fairly straightforward. Mary was the heroine. Martha was the villain. And too much of the time I was Martha! I felt the Lord convicting me of my tendency to rush around, busy with "many things" while ignoring the "one thing" that was needed—to sit at Jesus's feet.

But as I studied the rest of the sisters' story in John 11 and 12, I discovered something so beautiful, so amazing, that I felt compelled to share it in a book. For I saw two women change before my eyes, both of them experiencing a holy makeover when they encountered the living Lord.

And so, six years ago, *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World: Finding Intimacy with God in the Busyness of Life* was born. Perhaps the most comforting thing I learned as I worked on that book was that none of us has it all together. Even on our best days and with our best intentions, we all eventually blow it. We start out operating in our gifts and talents—excited to be serving the Messiah—only to have our efforts morph into a full-blown pity party when we don't get enough help, or we aren't appreciated, or someone else gets the attention we *know* we deserve.

But what stood out most to me was the fact that when Jesus scolded Martha about her busyness, He wasn't condemning her efficiency and hard work or her can-do personality. He wasn't telling her she had to be just like Mary to please Him. Jesus simply didn't want Martha to be so caught up in kitchen service *for* Him that she missed out on the joy of living-room intimacy *with* Him.

Jesus's actions challenged Mary as well in John 11. When her brother, Lazarus, was sick and dying, Jesus waited two days before making His way to Bethany. By then, Lazarus was dead. And Mary, apparently paralyzed by grief, declined to go out to meet Jesus and stayed in the house instead. Later, she cried out to Him. But while Jesus didn't answer her, He felt her pain. The Bible tells us, He wept.

Neither Mary nor Martha got what they expected from Jesus. Instead, they received much more. For God never withholds good except when He has something better to give. Whether it's more help in the kitchen or the miraculous healing of your brother, you can be sure Jesus knows what He's doing when He says no to our earthly requests in order to say yes to His heavenly plan.

But these two sisters had to accept Christ's better way—for it was a choice. Only as they humbled their hearts and learned from Him were they changed. Martha learned to be still and listen. Mary learned to pour out her heart as well as her expensive perfume in service. As they received Jesus's teaching, they learned the balance between a soul at rest and a body in motion, between working hard for Christ and sitting at His feet.

And I was learning right along with them. My Marthalike tendencies were being tempered by the tender grace of God. Because I no longer felt as if I had to earn the Father's favor, I was finally able to enjoy His lavish love. Rather than striving, I was learning what

John 15's abiding in the vine really means. As a result, like Mary and Martha, I, too, was being changed. I'm so glad we have a Savior who loves us just as we are, but loves us too much to leave us that way. After all, Christ's main purpose is to return to us the glory of God we were meant to reflect in this world. As author Donna Partow puts it: "Our task here on earth is to show the world an accurate reflection of what God is like. To show them, through our lives who God is."³

The whole purpose of our holy makeover, in other words, is to make us more and more like Jesus. But that divine transformation only happens as we choose to have a Mary spirit and accept the Lord's rebuke. Even when it hurts.

BRICK WALLS AND LEARNING CURVES

After completing *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*, I decided to take a six-month sabbatical. After being "spilled" out in my writing, I knew I needed time to be refilled.

I had no idea six months would turn into six years.

Not that they were barren years. No, far from that! During that time God taught me so much. He walked me through some valleys and up some mountaintops. I had the privilege of watching my son, John Michael, and my daughter, Jessica, grow up into wonderful young people. Then, three years ago, God surprised us with a baby we named Joshua—a truly unexpected blessing. Plus, our growing church purchased land, and we were finally ready to build our new facility—the one that had been years in the dreaming.

But it was that dream-coming-true that showed me just how far I still had to go. It also birthed this sequel. A book I didn't know existed. I was so certain I was on the right track with the church building project. As the daughter of a part-time contractor, I was familiar with the construction process. As plans progressed, I discovered in myself a vision and a passion I hadn't felt in a long time.

As the official launch of our fund-raising approached, I was running full tilt. There was so much to do—floor plans to finalize, brochures to design, numbers to crunch. I'd go to bed thinking about all the details and wake up with a focused energy and purpose that propelled me through my to-do list and beyond. It felt wonderful to be doing something for the Lord.

My pastor husband, John, tried to warn me. "Honey, I think you need to slow down. You're going to burn out." Of course I should have listened. My husband, unlike me, is not inclined to give his opinion 24/7. I should have realized that God was trying to get my attention through him. But I brushed away John's concern.

Sure, this was a crazy time, I told myself. Getting a ball rolling takes a lot of effort. I'd slow down later. I slowed down, all right. Brick walls have that effect on people. The brick wall, in this case, was a lack of funding. We were unable to raise enough pledges to complete the project, and we felt strongly that we were not to borrow funds. Plans would have to be scaled back. So many dreams and ministries we'd envisioned launching would have to be downsized as well. I tried my best to hang on to the initial vision. My Martha fix-it mode kicked in, and I scrambled to come up with ways to still fulfill the dream. But every option I came up with was discarded and, to be honest, my insistence began to wear on people.

Finally, I had to admit that God must have other things in mind. The vibrant passion I'd had for the project began to dwindle as discouragement and disappointment flooded in to take its place. "Why, God? I don't understand," I wailed. "I so wanted to do this right. What did I do wrong?"

In that moment this book was born.

THE MARTHA IN ME

Joanna, I sensed the Lord whisper to my tired soul. *You have a Martha spirit. You're a good girl wanting to do the right thing. But sometimes you do it the wrong way.*

A Martha spirit? Oh, man. I knew what that meant. Martha was trying to reassert herself in my life. Not the grown-up, lesson-learned, Jesus-changed Martha we meet near the end of the Gospels, but the old Martha. The highoctane, high-anxiety, chronically overachieving woman Jesus had to rebuke at her own dinner party. The Martha who loved the Lord but just couldn't be bothered to actually listen to Him. Who kept rushing in to do things her own way and complained loudly about anyone who dared do things differently. She was the Martha I thought I'd left behind—but she seemed to be running the show once again.

When you run ahead of me, the Lord impressed on my heart, *you end up doing what I've asked you to do in your own strength rather than mine. Instead of being cloaked in the sweetness of my Spirit, your efforts are cloaked in your flesh. And sometimes, my dear daughter, your flesh ain't that easy to receive.*

It was hard to hear, but I knew it was true. My woman-on-a-mission mode was rarely attractive. While I always strived to keep a sweet demeanor on the outside, my inner spirit—my heart attitude—often had an edge to it. Especially when I was busy. Especially when I was tired. Especially when things didn't go my way. You can only imagine the cosmic repercussions when the planets of those three *especially's* happened to align! And what made the truth even harder to bear was that I had learned—or thought I'd learned—this lesson before. More than once, in fact. It was the same truth God had sought to teach me back at the beginning of our ministry.

And again shortly after I finished *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*, when a misunderstanding led to a painful falling out with friends. Now here I was once again. Facing the same old flaws in myself. Struggling with a Martha spirit that continually tried to overshadow my Mary heart. “Lord, change me,” I prayed in all sincerity.

But, I must confess, with my repentance came an underlying fear. After so many years of being taught the same lesson over and over, would I ever be truly changed? Was lasting transformation even possible? I knew in my heart it was. After all, I had experienced God's hand in my life over the years. But how would it happen now? And how could I better cooperate with the process?

You need a Mary spirit, the Lord whispered. And once again, in the quiet of that moment, I understood what He meant.

In order to really change—and keep on changing—I needed the kind of heart attitude Mary had when she left her duties and spent time with Jesus, basking in His presence. The same kind of attitude Martha displayed when she chose to be teachable rather than offended by Jesus's rebuke.

For a Mary spirit is not a personality type. It isn't about being an extrovert versus an introvert or an active person versus a more contemplative type. Having a Mary spirit is about our attitude toward what God wants to do in our lives. The spirit behind our response to Him makes all the difference. Mary of Bethany seemed to have a Mary spirit from the beginning. And although it took the tough love of Christ, her sister Martha eventually had it too. But there are two other Marys I want to mention (both of whom we'll discuss in greater detail later)—women who shared with Mary of Bethany not only a name, but also the grace-filled peace of a heart in tune with God. First, Mary, the mother of Jesus, displayed a willing Mary spirit when she told the angel Gabriel, “Let it be to me according to your word.” Although everything within her must have balked at the implications of mothering the very Son of God,

and although she must have known in her heart that doing so would be costly, still she said yes to God's plan. Second, Mary Magdalene exhibited the gratefulness of a Mary spirit after Jesus set her free from seven demons. Rather than settling down to a "normal" life, she abandoned it all in order to follow the One who had brought her out of darkness and into His marvelous light. That grateful and persistent love for the Lord, that desire to always be near Him and follow wherever He leads— that's also part of a Mary spirit.

And that, I realized, is what I wanted.

*You see, Joanna, the Lord seemed to be saying, I delight in a heart that welcomes my work rather than resents it. A willing, teachable spirit is all I'm looking for. A life so surrendered to me, I can change it from the inside out. As God began to work these truths in my life, I realized this was the book He'd had me wait six years to write. For just as *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* shows us how to make room in our outer lives for intimacy with God, *Having a Mary Spirit* is meant to show us how to give God access to the deep, hidden corners of our hearts. Those dark, sin-ridden parts of our lower nature that continually cause us to stumble when we so desperately want to walk in the light. Those secret, not-so-silent kingdoms Christ came to conquer as well as redeem.*

So that we can be made holy as He is holy.

Changed from the inside out.

GIVING GOD ACCESS

I don't know your situation. I don't know what God is walking you through right now. But I suspect he's been stirring in you a divine discontentment—a hunger for something more, a desire to *be* something more. Otherwise you wouldn't have picked up this book.

May I tell you that such spiritual discontentment is a gift from God? For He only stirs us when He wants to change us. He only makes us feel uneasy with where we are so we're willing to do whatever it takes to get where He is. So if you're feeling those stirrings of discontentment, if you're tired of taking one step forward only to fall two steps back, if you, like me, would like to stop learning the same lessons over and over again, then I'd like to invite you to join me on an adventure of change.

And I can't think of a better place to start than with this prayer:

Lord Jesus, I give You my life.

I invite You to have Your way in me.

Take me and break me. Shake me and make me.

Fill me and spill me. Change me and rearrange me.

But whatever You do, Lord...don't leave me the same.

Spirit of wisdom and revelation, I welcome Your work.

Open my eyes so I can see...my ears so I can hear....

I choose truth over comfort, challenge over complacency.

Lord, make me forever Yours.

And most of all, make me like You.

Amen.

HAVING A MARY SPIRIT

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