

## CHRIST QUESTIONS MARTHA, AND YOU

"Believeth thou this? She said unto Him. Yes Lord," John 11:26, 27.

**T**hese words were addressed to Martha by the Lord as she was writhing in agony over her dead brother. Christ proclaims with singular calmness and majesty His character and work as the "resurrection and the life," and then seeks to draw her from her absorbing sorrow to an effort of faith which shall grasp the truths He proclaims. He flashed out this sudden question, like the swift thrust of a gleaming dagger. It is a demand for credence to His assertion, on His bare Word, tremendous as that assertion is.

And nobly was the demand met by the as swift, unflinching answer, "Yes, Lord, I believe in Thee," and so I believe in Thy Word. Now Christ is putting the same question to us, each of us. And I hope we have the same answer as Martha had.

First, I WANT YOU TO SEE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE QUESTION. "This." What is "this?" "Believeth thou 'this?'" The answer will tell us what are the central essential facts, faith in which makes a Christian. Of course, the form in which our Lord's previous utterance was cast was colored by the circumstances under which He spoke and was so shaped as to meet the momentary exigency. But while the form is determined by the fact that He was speaking to a heart wrung by separation, and as a preliminary to a mighty act of resurrection, the essential Truths which are so expressed are those which, as I believe, constituted the fundamental Truths of Christianity, the very core and heart of the Gospel.

We have to see what immediately preceded this verse. Our Lord says three things. First He asserts His supernatural character, and Divine relation to life, "I am the resurrection and the life." Next He declares that it is possible for Him to communicate to dying and to dead men a life which triumphs over death, and laughs at change, and persists

through the superficial experience which we christen by the name of death, unaffected, undiminished, as some sweet spring might gush up in the heart of a salt, solitary sea.

**And then He declares that the condition on which He, the Life-giver, gives of His immortal life to dying men, is their trust in Him.** These three, His character and work, the gifts of which His hands are full, and the way by which the gifts may be appropriated by us men, these three are, as I see it, the central facts of Christianity. "BELIEVEST THOU THIS?"

This question comes to all of us, and in these days of unsettlement it is well to have some clear understanding of what is the "irreducible minimum" of Christian teaching. There are two opposite errors which, like all opposite errors, are bolted together, and revolve round a common center. The one of them is the extreme conservative tendency which regards every pin and bolt of the tabernacle as if it were equally sacred with the altar and the ark.

And the other is the tendency which christens itself "liberal and progressive" and which is always ready to exchange old lamps, though they have burnt brightly in the past, for new ones that are as yet only glittering metal and untried, in these days, when it is a presumption against any opinion, that our fathers believed it, an error into which young people are most prone to fall, and when, by the energy of contradiction, that error has evoked and is evoking, the opposite exaggeration that adheres to all that is traditional, to all that has been regarded as belonging to the essentials of the Christian faith. And so is fearful, trembling for the ark of God when there is no need, let us fall back upon these great Words of the Lord, and see that the things which constitute the living heart of His message and gift to the world are neither more nor less than these three, the supernatural Christ, the life which

He imparts and the condition on which He bestows it. "Believest thou this?"

"BELIEVEST" "THOU" "THIS!" If you do, you need take very little heed of the fluctuations of contemporary opinion as to the other matters, valuable and important as these may be in their place, and may let men say what they will about disputed questions, about the method by which the vehicle of revelation of the external forms of the Church, about a hundred other things that men often lose their tempers and spoil their Christianity by fighting for, and fall back upon the great general verity, a Christ from above, the Giver of life to all that put their trust in Him.

"We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "Believest thou this?" "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." "Believest thou this?" "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." "Believest thou this?" "The Son of man came to give His life a ransom for many." "Believest thou this?" "Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." "Believest thou this?"

"Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the First Fruits of them that slept." "Believest thou this?" "I go to prepare a place for you." "Believest thou this?" "Where I am there shall also My servant be." "Believest thou this?" "So shall we ever be with the Lord." "Believest thou this?"

Now that is Christianity, and not theories about inspiration, and priesthood, and sacramental efficacy, or any of the other thorn questions which have, in the course of the ages, started up. **Here is living center, hold fast to it.**

Then again the significance of the question to Martha, "Believest thou this?" is in the direction of making clear to her and us the way by which men lay hold of these great Truths. The Truths are of such a sort as that merely to say, "Oh, yes, I believe it. It is quite true," **is by no means sufficient.** If a man

tells you that two parallel lines produced ever so far will never meet, I say, "Yes, I believe it," and there is nothing more to be done or said. If someone says to you, "Two and two make four," I say, yes, or you say yes, and there our assent ends. If a man says to you, "It is right to do right," it is quite clear that the attitude of intellectual assent, which was quite enough for the other order of statements, is not enough for this one, and to merely say, "Oh, yes, it is right to do right," it is by no means the only attitude which we ought to take in regard to such a truth.

And if God comes to us and says, "Thou art a sinful man, and Jesus Christ has died for you, and if you take Him for your Saviour, you will be saved in this life, and saved forever," it is just as clear that no more acceptance of the saying as a verity exhausts our proper attitude in reference to it. No man will really, and out and out, and adequately believe this Gospel unless he does a great deal more than assent to it or refrain from contradicting it.

So the question is, "Do you trust in 'this which you say you believe?'" Here is no greater enemy of Christian faith than the ordinary lazy, what the philosophers call OTI-OSE, which is only a grand word for lazy, assent of the understanding, because men will not take the trouble to contradict it nor think about it.

Now that is the sort of Christianity which is the Christianity of a good many church and chapel goers. They do not care enough about the subject to contradict the ordinary run of belief. **Of all impotent things, there is nothing more impotent than a creed which lies idly in a man's head, and never had touched his free will.**

Some people have heard the Gospel so often that the "debris" of your old hearings is raised between you and the Lord, and His Words cannot get at you. "Believest thou this?" Not in the fashion in which people stand up in church or chapel and look about them and rattle off the creed every Sunday of their lives, and attach not the ghost of an idea to a single clause of it, but in the sense

that the conviction of these Truths is so deep in your hearts that it moves your whole nature to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour and your All. That is the belief to which alone the life that is promised here will come.

And just think what depends upon this answer to this question to Martha. In the case before us, there is a very illuminative instance of what did depend upon it. Martha had to believe that Christ was the "Resurrection and the Life," as a condition, as a precedent to her seeing that He was so. For, as He said Himself, before He spoke the mighty Word which raised Lazarus. "Said I not unto thee that if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?"

And so her faith was the condition of her being able to verify the facts which her faith grasped. **This means that a man gets from Christ what he trusts Christ to give Him, and there is no other way of proving the Truth of His promises than by accepting His promises, and then they fulfill themselves.** You cannot know that a medicine will cure you till you swallow it. You must first "taste" before you see that God is good. **Faith verifies itself by the experience it brings.**

And what does it bring? All for which a man trusts Christ. All is summed up in that one favorite Word of our Lord as revealed in the Gospel of John, which includes in itself everything of blessedness and of righteousness, and that is life, and life eternal.

We are apart from Christ dead in trespasses and sin. The life that we live in the flesh is an apparent life, which covers over the true death of our separation from God. And it will save you many a heartache, and many an error, there is nothing worth called life, except that which comes to a quiet heart submissive and enfranchised through faith in Jesus Christ.

And if you trust yourself to Him, and answer this question with your ringing, "Yes, Lord," then you will get a life which will quicken you out of your deadness, a life

which will mold you day by day into more entire beauty of character and conformity with Christ Himself, a life which will shed sweetness and charm over dusty commonplaces and make sudden verdure spring in dreary, herbless, deserts, a life which will bring manna in the wilderness, honey from the rock, light in darkness and a present God for your sufficient portion, a life which will run on into the dim glories of eternity, and know no change but advancement, through the millenniums of ages.

But even though through faith the door into Divine and endless blessedness and progress is flung wide open for men, do not forget the other side of the issues which depend on this question. For it is true that Jesus Christ is life, and the source of it, and that faith in Him is the way by which you and I get it, then there is no escape from the solemn conclusion that to be out of Christ, and not to be exercising faith in Him, is to be infected with death, and to be shut up in a charnel house. His plain teaching is always, "He that hath the Son hath life. He that hath not the Son hath not life."

The issues that depend upon the answer to this question of our text may be summed up, if we may venture to say so, by taking the Words of our Lord Himself and converting them into their opposite. He said, "He that believeth on Me shall never die." That implies that He that believeth not in Christ, though he were living, yet shall he die, and whosoever liveth and believeth not shall never live. These are the issues, the alternative issues, that depend on your answer to this question put to Martha. And finally we have the direct personal appeal to every soul that lies in this question. The Lord deals with Martha as an individual.

We have dwelt on two of the three words of which the question is composed. "Believest thou this?" Now that suggests the thought on which we do not need to dwell, but which we seek briefly to lay upon your heart and conscience, the intensely personal act of your own faith, by which alone Jesus Christ can be of any use to you. Do not be

led away by any vague notions which people have about the benefits of a church or its ordinances. Do not suppose that any sacraments or any priest can do for you what you have to do in the awful solitude of your own determining will, **put out your hand and grasp Jesus Christ.**

Can any person or thing be the condition or channel of spiritual blessing to you except in so far as your own individual act of trust come into play? You must take the bread with your own hands, you must masticate it with your own teeth, you must digest it with your own organs, before it can minister nourishment to your blood and force to your life.

There is only one way by which any man can come into any vital and lifegiving connection with Jesus Christ, and that is, by the exercise of His own personal faith. And remember too, that as the exercise of uniting trust in Jesus Christ is exclusively your own affair, so exclusively your own affair is the responsibility of answering this question. To you alone is it addressed. You and only you, have to answer it.

There was once a poor woman who went after Jesus Christ, and put out a pale, wasted, tremulous finger in order to touch the hem of His garment. His fine sensitiveness detected the light pressure of that petitioning finger, and allowed virtue to go out, though the crowd surged about Him and thronged Him. No crowds come between you and Jesus Christ. **You and He, the two of you, have so to speak, the world to yourselves, and straight to you comes this question, "Believest thou?"**

The human habit of sulking into the middle of the multitude, and letting the most earnest appeal from the pulpit go diffused over

the audience is the reason you sit there quiet, complacent, perhaps, wholly unaffected by what I am trying to make a point, individual address. Suppose all the other people in this place of worship were away but you and I, would not the Word that I am trying to speak come with more force to your heart than it does now?

**Well, think away the world, and all its millions, and realize the fact that you stand in Christ's presence, with all His regard concentrated upon you, and that to you individually this question comes from a gracious, loving heart, which longs that you answer "Yes, Lord. I believe."**

Why should you not? Suppose you said to Him, "No, Lord I do not." And suppose He said, "Why do you not?" What do you think you would say then? **You will have to answer it one day, in very solemn circumstances,** when all the crowds will fall away, as they do from a soldier called out of the ranks to go up and answer for mutiny to his commanding officer. "Everyone of you shall give an account of himself." And the lips that said so livingly at the grave of Lazarus to Martha, "Believest thou this?" are still being said to you.

For this is the question the answer to which settles whether we shall stand at His right hand or at His left. You can say now with humble faith, "Yes, Lord," and you will have the blessing of them who have not seen, and yet have believed.

Martha, a *Woman in My Life*, who brought forth this wonderful question from the mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ, which when answered by faith in Christ, brought me my so great salvation. Have you met Martha?