

# Mary Praises the Covenant-Keeping God

## September 29, 2019

### Sermon Discussion

- **Zechariah was a righteous man, but he stumbled in unbelief. How common a problem do you think unbelief is among Christians?**
- **Can you describe a time when you struggled to believe a promise of God or a part of God's Word?**
- **What kinds of things have helped you in your battle against unbelief?**

Luke addressed his Gospel to Theophilus, though the reason and context are uncertain, but we do know something of this writer as a person. We know Luke was a faithful companion of the apostle Paul. At the end of Paul's life, as he was facing the prospect of death under the Roman emperor Nero, only Luke had the courage to remain beside him (2 Tim. 4:11). This simple fact tells us an enormous amount about the character of the writer of this Gospel. We also know that Luke was a doctor, since Paul referred to him as one in Colossians 4:14. As a doctor, then, he was almost certainly a slave as well, since most doctors—indeed most professional people—in the first century were slaves.

Luke gave us more information about the circumstances leading up to Jesus' birth than any other Gospel writer. His Gospel introduces us to Jesus' mother, Mary, and the character of this bold young woman of faith. In Mary we see a picture of faithfulness and a willingness to be "the servant of the Lord."

- **What facts do you and your group already know about Mary, the mother of Jesus?**

- **What picture do these facts give you about the character of Mary as a servant of God?**

In this session we witness Mary's first experience of God's remarkable call on her life—to be the mother of Jesus the Messiah. A young woman, probably still in her teens, Mary was confronted by the angel Gabriel with the news that God intended to use her to fulfill the greatest promise of His covenant. Mary's response as "the servant of the Lord" becomes an example for all Christian obedience. In our own lives, we must recognize that God calls us to obedience, even when it is costly. Like Mary, we magnify the Lord through our obedience as servants of God and followers of Christ.

### **1. Mary Submits to God's Difficult Plan for Her Life (Luke 1:26-38).**

It is not surprising to see that Luke, who was a doctor and perhaps a slave, was interested in the most marginalized people of his day. Throughout his Gospel, Luke noted that women were often the first ones to understand what Jesus was doing. Here is an example at the beginning of the Gospel: Zechariah, a religious man, didn't understand what God was going to do (though he should have), and Mary, a simple girl, intuitively understood what God was going to do (though we wouldn't expect her to).

The image of the great angel Gabriel appearing to a marginalized teenager in an insignificant and impoverished village like Nazareth establishes a contrast that Luke will maintain throughout his Gospel. This is, after all, the same Gabriel we find in the Book of Daniel as the messenger of God (cf. Dan. 9:23). Earlier in the story, Gabriel was forced to explain his identity to the incredulous priest in the holy place: "And Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.'" You can almost hear the tone in Gabriel's voice when he responded to Zechariah's disbelief: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God" (Luke 1:18-19).

But now Gabriel has found a more faithful person. Her Jewish name is Miriam. She too asks a question: "How will this be?" Luke intended for us to appreciate the contrast between the disbelieving priest in the magnificent temple and the trusting girl in impoverished Nazareth.

- **Why was Zechariah’s question a sign of his weakness of faith but Mary’s question a sign of her strength?**
- **What do we learn from the way Mary responded to the angel’s message?**
- **What did the angel mean when he said Mary was “favored”?**

Mary’s question was reasonable. How could she—a virgin—possibly have a child? Gabriel’s gentle response was that the Spirit of God would “overshadow” her. This is the same word the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, used to describe the Spirit of God “hovering” over the face of the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2). To bolster confidence in the Lord’s ability to fulfill this promise, Gabriel revealed to Mary that her relative, the elderly Elizabeth, was already six months pregnant.

Mary responded with faith. She declared herself to be the slave of the Lord, her Master. This was her identity. After all, slaves have no choices; they surrender them all to their masters. Even though there was so much that she did not know, Mary had a deep-rooted faith and trust, and that was where her submissive spirit came from. She was ready to submit to God’s difficult plan for her life.

- **How does Mary’s response—“I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”—reveal the posture every faithful Christian should have?**

## **2. Mary Magnifies God for His Goodness and Mercy (Luke 1:46-50).**

The beautiful submission of Mary is on display in her song that magnified the goodness and mercy of the Lord. It is only after we let go of our choices and submit ourselves in obedience to our Master that any of us can truly begin to sing. As the slave of the Lord, Mary was, in fact, free. Moreover,

her identity was rooted in the call of God and did not sway based on the difficulty of her situation.

Mary celebrated the greatness of her Lord and Savior because He had looked with favor on the condition of His servant—on her condition. As do so many of the psalms, Mary sang of the mercy, of the hesed (loving faithfulness), of her Lord. The baby she would bear, the new hope that was being born into the world, was rooted in the mercy of God.

- **Make a list of things Mary praised God for in Luke 1:46-50.**
- **What are the common themes?**
- **How has Mary experienced these themes in her own life?**

Mercy, by definition, is something we need the most when we deserve it the least. When God acted by sending His own Son, the natural human response to His over-the-top gift of hope through His mercy was poetic and lyrical.

Songs better express what is going on in the heart and imagination than prose. They are tools that allow us to remember every time we sing them again. They make it possible for the community to join together in chorus. Most of all, they make it possible for us to express to God our recognition of His worth. They make “worth-ship” a reality.

- **Name two or three of your favorite songs that magnify the Lord for His goodness and mercy.**
- **Why do these songs resonate with you?**
- **What aspects of God’s character do they celebrate?**

### **3. Mary Trusts God to Keep His Promises to His People (Luke 1:51-55).**

Mary's language reveals a heart and mind that must have been saturated with the psalms and songs of the Old Testament. For the moment, she has become a psalmist herself. And like David, she understood that the new hope that was being born into the world was based on an ancient hope.

The God of the Gospels is a God who is always in the process of turning the world upside down. The new hope that was being born, the hope that is the subject of so many songs in the Scriptures, was granted to the outsiders, to the poor in spirit. In order to be rich, we learn to let go of our riches. In order to become wise, we embrace the foolishness of the cross. In order to become mature, we become like little children. In order to become truly free, we become slaves to God.

Jesus Himself won everything by losing everything. Paul said He was crucified in weakness (2 Cor. 13:4). Yet somehow in the mystery of the way God works in the world, the cross has granted an endless strength to those who have suffered and are suffering still.

This is the radical reversal, the "upside-down-ness" of the kingdom that the church easily forgets. Every time she has believed that the answer is found in the exercise of power, the church has parted company with Jesus, the Son of Mary. In her pierced soul and His pierced hands and feet, they magnified the Lord. They showed that despite their suffering, God remained their treasure. And in Christ's case, the suffering He endured on the cross brought about the ultimate reversal and offered salvation to the world.

### **Conclusion**

The Gospels don't provide any scenes of her struggling inwardly to come to grips with the demands of becoming the mother of the Messiah, but it is not hard to imagine that she had a place and a definite impact on Jesus' life as He grew to manhood. Did her life of humility and obedience shape His heart and life as well? Was her instinct toward obedience imprinted on Him from an early age? Could His mother's example of complete submission to the plan of God for her life have inspired Him as He came to grips with the

fact that He too had come in the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6-11)? Such are the beautiful mysteries of the incarnation—God taking on human flesh and entering the womb of a woman!

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