

# **THE LADY WHO SAID “YES” TO GOD**

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Over the centuries many myths have evolved about Mary, the mother of Jesus. This booklet in the Good News Series attempts to cut away the falsehood and uncover the fascinating truth revealed in the Scriptures about this wonderful woman.

A clearer understanding of her may help us to a clearer understanding of her Son.

Many Christians have neglected Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is a possible reaction to the feeling that some have exalted her to veneration—beyond what Scripture says.

But she deserves better treatment, for Scripture discloses a surprising wealth of information about her. A more realistic understanding of her can make possible a better appreciation of her divine Son in His incarnation. This could enlarge the boundaries of our faith.

The Bible is not the source of some popular beliefs about her; for example, the idea of her own

"immaculate conception" in the womb of her mother. Scripture requires that Mary partake of the same common genes that all humans receive from their parents, and Jesus was truly born of her and in His incarnation partook of her genes. Christ alone "committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22). Of the rest of mankind we read that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Mary herself went on record acknowledging her personal need of a "Savior," something no sinless person could confess: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." (Luke 1:46,47)

Neither does the Bible represent Mary as a "dispenser of grace." Rather, it portrays her as a unique receiver of grace:

"The angel said to her, 'Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!'... Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.'" (Luke 1:28, 30)

"He who is mighty has done great things for me." (verse 49)

The idea of her perpetual virginity is likewise derived from tradition, not Scripture. It rests on a non-biblical view of sex which distorts the divinely ordained blessing of human maleness and femaleness (see Genesis 1:27, 31; Proverbs 5:15-18; Matthew 1:25). Misconceptions of Mary's virginity contribute to that false piety that regards sex in marriage as contrary to true holiness.

While we do not find in Scripture even a hint of Mary's exaltation to worship or veneration by the early Christians, significant glimpses of her personality and character do shine through. For example:

1. She apparently loved beautiful literature, and was good at writing poetry. This is evident in her poem known as the Song of Mary or the Magnificat. (Luke 1:46-55; reproduced on Page 17)

2. She appears intelligent and clearheaded in crisis, calm, and self-composed. We see this in her handling of her visit with the angel Gabriel when he announced that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah:

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, 'Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!'

"But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom

there will be no end.'

"Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?'

"And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born, will be called the Son of God.'

"Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her." (Luke 1:26-35, 38)

**3.** She was distinguished as quiet, thoughtful, and tight-lipped. We gather this from Luke's remarks about the birth and childhood of Jesus: "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Such great secrets would be hard for most of us to keep!

**4.** Her childlike faith was so mature that God

could use her as His agent in the greatest miracle of all time. Elizabeth commended the faith of the newly pregnant Mary in words of coveted benediction: "Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord." (Luke 1:45)

**5.** Probably more than any other woman, Mary had a capacity for sorrow. "Blessed" (happy) she was indeed, but her sensitive soul could also be rent with a pain that no other woman of all time could know.

"A sword will pierce through your own soul also," said the discerning Simeon as a surge of inspiration thrilled his soul while he held her holy Child in his arms in the Temple (Luke 2:35). That sword was to pierce her soul many times during the next 33 years; then she had to watch her Son die on a cross. That was a pain infinitely beyond that of any ordinary mother who watches an ordinary son die in agony and abuse, for His death surpassed in magnitude all other deaths.

6. The grace of God enabled Mary to be a wise mother to her precious Son. Indeed, no woman can ever be a wise mother apart from that same grace. But the trust and responsibility that God reposed in this woman astound us. "Rejoice, highly favored one ... blessed are you among women," said the angel.

We cannot be Bible-believing Christians unless we accept the full significance of the divine Christ becoming one of us: Mary's Son was indeed her Son; the Word had become human flesh, which she gave to Him. Heaven fully entrusted the precious Infant to her care. One careless, thoughtless, selfish tantrum on Mary's part as mother could have tarnished the character of her impressionable Offspring, for His infancy and childhood were a human learning experience as are ours. We read that He "learned obedience" and that He was "subject" to His earthly parents (Hebrews 5:8; Luke 2:51). Mary's motherhood was an unspeakably marvelous accomplishment, and we justly fulfil her prophecy, "All generations will call me blessed." (Luke 1:48)

Was Mary the ravishingly beautiful teenager that artists have delighted in painting her to be? As such, did the village boys swarm around her to covet her? Several New Testament disclosures hint that as a girl she might have suffered painful disappointments, a condition that doesn't fit the popular idea of her being a beautiful teenager. While the Bible is indeed fully inspired, it may be that artists' paintings are less so.

In her revealing poem, Mary says that God "has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant" (Luke 1:48). The Greek word is *tapeinosis*, which is translated "humiliation" in Acts 8:33. (The verb means to be "abased" in 2 Corinthians 11:7 and Luke 14:11.) It is a word that aptly pictures the scorn and dishonor suffered by Christ in His illegal condemnation and death. The word evokes more than the ordinary lowliness of peasantry. It means painful, embarrassing humiliation, and for some important reason Mary applies it to herself.

The Gospel records make it clear that Joseph

must have been a widower with at least six children. The names of four boys are specified in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 (James, Joses, Simon, and Judas), and at least two girls are mentioned. The boys were obviously older than Jesus, for John tells how they tried to boss Him around, something only older boys would dare to do in Jewish culture (John 7:3-5). One could wonder what widower in his right mind with at least six motherless children would want to marry a young teenager to be their stepmother. (Of course, when Joseph became engaged to Mary, the thought of her becoming the mother of the Messiah could not have entered his mind.) What he needed was a mature woman to help him with his domestic problems.

When the angel Gabriel announced Mary's pregnancy to her, she naturally wanted to share the exciting secret with her closest friend and confidante, as any woman would. Was that confidante a teenage friend in Nazareth? No. We find she leaves "with haste" for the mountain home of the aged Elizabeth, a woman who like Hannah

of old had known the bitterness of the shame of barren Jewish womanhood. Elizabeth's tapeinosis had also been taken away from her by her miraculous conception in old age of John the Baptist (see Luke 1:5-25; 39-44). Why would Mary seek such companionship rather than that of teenage pals? Did she and Elizabeth have something in common other than a tie of family nearness?

Mary's Son is known as "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Mary said she too had tasted the pain of tapeinosis, perhaps including the humiliating rejection of being passed by, of being not desired. Her favorite heroine was obviously Hannah, that exquisitely sorrowful mother of the prophet Samuel, for Mary's Song is modeled closely on Hannah's poignant song of rejoicing at the birth of her own son after all her own pain (cf. 1 Samuel 2:1-10). Hannah knew the prick at least of a "sword" piercing her soul, the apparently God-forsaken bitterness of being passed by childless while He seemed to favor the arrogant second wife Peninah (1 Samuel 1:4-10). Few

radiant sought-after teenage girls find time to identify so emotionally with someone like Hannah.

We don't know what Mary looked like, for no artist that we know of ever had her for his model. Although her Son possessed the true beauty of a loving character, we probably would never have turned our heads to look at Him twice had we not known who He was. We read of Him, "He has no form nor comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men" (Isaiah 53:2,3). He was Mary's Son in His incarnation.

What was Mary's "humiliation" [tapeinosis]? Was she also for some reason "despised and rejected by men"? Had she wet her pillow with solitary tears? Did it seem that she would be forever denied the dream of every Jewish woman—marriage and becoming (perhaps) the mother of the long-awaited Messiah? If so, imagine her heart-bursting joy when she sang her hymn, "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state [painful humiliation]

of His maidservant."

Consider the amazing maturity of this woman's faith. Surely she was sophisticated enough to know that her mysterious pregnancy would raise eyebrows all over town, not to mention the all-too-likely reaction of Joseph when he should get the news. This could be virtual suicide for a woman like her! Her incomparable joy of pregnancy must now be marred by that other painful sorrow, social ostracism. Any ordinary woman would ask, "What will my Joseph think? Yes, what will the neighbors say?" And John says that the neighbors forever after had plenty to say, for the Jews scornfully reproached her innocent Son with their supercilious taunt, "We were not born of fornication!" (John 8:41).

But Mary was ready; bravely she accepted the burden God would lay upon her: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word!" (Luke 1:38).

When Caesar Augustus issued his imperial

decreed requiring Joseph to journey to Bethlehem for the census, it would be natural for Mary to want to go along, if only to avoid the neighbor's taunts. It's not necessary to assume that she consciously wanted to stage her delivery at Bethlehem. Obviously she and Joseph had no relatives there to help them, otherwise they would not have had to seek an inn and be put up in a stable with the cows and donkeys.

And perhaps Mary did not realize that the birth could be so near, or she would not have undertaken a 70-mile journey on foot or on a donkey's back. (It couldn't have been December, for such travel would be impossible in the cold, rain, and snow of that time of year, nor could shepherds have been camping out in the fields; the December birth date is a relic of European mythology.)

The physician Luke tells the story in a way that implies that the birth came unexpectedly soon: "So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered" (Luke 2:6). And she had no layette! The original barn experience

could not have been as romantic as artists have painted it to be. Having a baby in a stinking cow pen and having to lay Him in a donkey's feed box is no antiseptic fun. She must have later told her Son of the dangerous circumstances of His birth in such unhygienic surroundings. According to His own prophetic words:

"But you are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You have been My God. Be not far from Me, for trouble is near; for there is none to help."  
(Psalm 22:9-11)

Already the sorrow that was always to mingle with Mary's joy was intruding. If her Baby was the Lord's Christ, why didn't God provide for her better? Why did He let her have Him in a barn? Was He neglecting her, forsaking her? Why didn't He impress someone in Bethlehem to be hospitable?

Although Mary never gave in to nagging doubt,

the powerful temptation returned again and again. Her Boy was delightfully different from other children, but sometimes He could be painfully different as well. It was often hard to understand Him.

A sinless Boy was not always welcome in Nazareth's sinful society, and family members would easily misunderstand Him. As a devout Jew Mary would feel deeply ingrained reverence for the honored rabbis of the synagogue. Why must her Son so often have different ideas than they had? From His childhood all the way to His cross, Jesus' failure to win the good will of the priests and leaders must have given her a constant pang of painful perplexity. And the step-brothers who often nagged and despised Him only made her sorrow worse.

### **And then finally, there was Calvary**

The leaders' mysterious rejection of Him, the apparently legal condemnation of the illegal trials, the soldiers' cruel mockings and beatings that the

leadership allowed and even encouraged, the phenomenal hatred heaped on Him, and then the crucifixion—all seemed a wild nightmare. This couldn't be real! How could this be happening to her Son, if He was the Messiah?

But there He was, stretched on a criminal's cross; and even He had reportedly confessed what implied that His enemies must be right, for He had cried out in anguish something about "My God, my God" forsaking Him! Had she been mistaken all along? Was He only a pious, naive fraud, a self-deceived maniac? Had she borne such a Son?

Under intense emotional and social pressure, good people can be tempted to doubt themselves and to confess crimes they never committed. The agony of Mary's temptation at the cross must have been horrendous. Gazing incredulously at the awful sight, she would wonder whether she had only imagined the angel Gabriel's visit at the beginning, the virgin birth, the visits of the shepherds, and their tale of angels singing in the sky, and the wise men and their gifts from the East.

And then she would recall the unfailing love evident in her Son's character, even from His childhood, His unusually thoughtful tenderness to her, His miracles, the shouts of the people acclaiming Him. How under heaven could this be happening if her Son was the Messiah? How could He be dying as a criminal, naked and despised? Something must be wrong somewhere. Where was God?

Mary would also recall the aged Simeon's cryptic prophecy of "a sword" piercing her own soul. Could this be what he meant?

Mary's natural mother love for a faithful Son made the "sword" rend her heart the more cruelly.

But even more excruciating was an awful fear too dark to think about. Perhaps everything had been only a wild dream; perhaps there was no gospel. Maybe she had only imagined the "good tidings of great joy to all people" such as the shepherds said they heard the angels sing about.

The "sword" was more than the piercing of a proud mother's dreams; it pierced humanity's hopes that transcended her mother's love, and made it greater than itself. Surely no human soul other than that of her Son was ever so wrenched with agony.

That God in heaven could find such a woman on earth to bear such a personal cross is the all-time miracle of womanhood. Mary remains the human mother of our Savior, and as such she deserves our eternal gratitude. And her Son deserves more appreciative worship and adoration than we have yet been able to give Him, for such is what true New Testament faith is.

### The Song of Mary (The Magnificat)

"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.  
For He has regarded the lowly state of His  
    maidservant;  
For behold, henceforth all generations will call  
    me blessed.  
For He who is mighty has done great things for

me,  
And holy is His name.  
And His mercy is on those who fear Him  
From generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with His arm;  
He has scattered the proud in the imagination  
of their hearts.  
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
And exalted the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
And the rich He has sent away empty.  
He has helped His servant Israel,  
In remembrance of His mercy,  
As He spoke to our fathers,  
To Abraham and to his seed forever."  
Luke 1:46-55

## **Jesus was a Youth and Knows Your Problems Exactly**

### **The Shortest Sermon in the Bible**

Do you ever get bored listening to long dry sermons? Let me tell you about the shortest sermon in the Bible—it's only one sentence. It was preached by someone who has a right to the pulpit at least once in her lifetime—the Virgin Mary. She preaches to the frustrated servants who don't know what to do about an emergency: "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5). Then, a period. She's talking about her Son, Jesus.

You can't get bored with such a short sermon, but you can get frustrated by it. It seems He's always telling me to do something that I feel I just can't do. Those poor servants: He told them, "Fill the water pots with water"—easy enough; then, "take them to the master of the feast—easy enough. But they must tell the boss, "Sir, here's your wine you asked for," when they know very well it's only water. Now that's hard! Doing or saying what your

heart says isn't so—is anything harder?

Let's find the Good News here:

It's your heavenly Father who is telling you to do this or that.

A true Father never drives or "provokes" you to frustration (remember Paul's counsel to fathers, "do not provoke your children" [Ephesians 6:4]?).

He is telling you what to do; now take the time to ask Him how to do it; He'll respond.

Note that Mary did not say, "whatever your friends tell you to do, do it," or "what your teachers, counselors, or your parents even, tell you." They may be right and they may be wrong, but no one understands you like your Heavenly Father. (Psalm 27:10 will help you there.)

Jesus was a youth. He knows your problems exactly, was tempted precisely like you are "in all things," understands your selfish fear, still likes

you (loves you). Believe it.

Listen to Him at the age of 12. He tells His doubting, frustrated parents: "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). In other words, "Whatever He says to Me, I must do it!" He anticipated His own mother's sermon!

Do you feel helpless? At least you can look! Watch Him, listen to Him in Gethsemane, on His cross. Identify with Him there. Your dead, lifeless heart will experience a resurrection "with Him."