

## Pregnant, Married, On The Move

The Roman Empire called a census which required everyone to return to their birth place to register. Joseph was from Bethlehem so he and Mary were forced to make an 80 mile desert journey when Mary was in her ninth month. They were poor. Did they have to walk? Was there an animal to ride? Either way imagine Mary's discomfort. And concern. I'm sure she was counting on being with her mom and her girlfriends to help with her baby's birth. Traveling over bumpy rocks and hills to a strange town must have been frightening. What if she had her baby in the middle of the desert? Still, she followed her husband and trusted God.

When the couple got to Bethlehem, things got worse. Mary went into labor and there was no place for them to stay. You know the story. If Mary wanted to get mad at God, this would have been the perfect time! Did He want her to give birth on a street corner? Why didn't God at least provide a warm room if she couldn't be with her family? Didn't God know there was going to be a census? But there's no record of Mary complaining. Only trusting. God provided a stable.

So, there she was, about to give birth to the King of Glory -- in a most inglorious place. Not to mention unsterile, uncomfortable and cold. And lonely. It must have smelled of manure and rotting hay... and dirty animals. But it was in this humble place that our Lord Jesus was born. He was wrapped in rags and put in a feeding trough for a cradle. It marked the beginning of His journey on earth. And the beginning of Mary's joy and sorrow as His mother.

The only visitors they had were the ones God sent: Some shepherds from a nearby field (the roughnecks of their day) and some Gentiles who were not part of Jewish life at all. Still, they read the starry heavens and recognized this miraculous event!

Eight days after His birth, according to Jewish Law, Jesus was circumcised and officially named. About a month later He was taken to the temple in Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord. While there, a devout man named Simeon recognized Jesus as the Messiah. He also gave a frightening prophecy to His young mother. Simeon told Mary,

"A sword will pierce through your own soul also." (Lk 2:35)

Meanwhile, King Herod heard the Jewish Messiah had been born and jealously ordered the slaughter of every male child aged two or under living in or near Bethlehem. But God gave Joseph another angelic dream telling him to take Jesus and His mother to Egypt where they'd be safe. Now they were refugees on the run.

After King Herod died the Lord sent Mary and Joseph back to Israel, then guided them home to Nazareth. Now among family and friends, Mary and Joseph, who was a carpenter, raised Jesus. Many years passed and perhaps it began to seem more like a normal life after so much drama in the early years. The privilege of raising Jesus to manhood must have been phenomenal. What an incredible and awesome responsibility!

## Mary Alone

Many scholars believe Joseph died during Jesus' teenage years because the Bible simply stops mentioning him. So now Mary would endure the loneliness of a widowed single mother. A single mother with many treasures hidden in her heart about Jesus. As Jesus grew He continued to demonstrate the gifts that

would eventually take Him away from His mother and Nazareth. Mary must have felt it too.

It was Mary who compelled Jesus to do his first miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. Jesus already had 12 disciples following Him, and when they saw this miracle their commitment grew. And as the fulfillment of Jesus' calling drew closer, Mary needed to give Him greater release in her own heart. He'd lived at home about 30 years. Now He would be thrust onto the center state of history -- and sent forth.

Sadly, when Jesus returned to Nazareth with His message, He was not well received. It must have hurt Mary to see her son rejected by their friends and relatives. We don't really know how much contact Jesus had with His mother once His ministry kicked into high gear. We know Mary sought Him out at least once while He was teaching in a home. But I'm sure she kept track of Him, as any loving mother would.

Was Mary in Jerusalem, which is far away from Nazareth, when Jesus was arrested? Did the crowd drown out her cries for Jesus when they yelled for Barabbas instead of the life of her son? Did she see Him scourged? Did she follow helplessly by His side as He carried His cross down the Via Dolorosa? There's a good chance Mary was there for all that because we know one thing for sure:

Mary was in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified. She was with Him at the cross.

## At The Cross

Mary was a powerful and courageous witness to her own child's execution. Did she understand He would rise from the dead? Perhaps not. The disciples certainly didn't understand. Mary must have watched in unbearable sorrow as long rugged nails were hammered into the Son's wrists and ankles. She must have gasped as the wooden cross was raised high, then dumped into the ground. She knew this inhumane, torturous Roman execution was reserved only for the most despicable criminals.

As Mary watched perhaps all her promises -- the very things she'd based her whole life on -- were being nailed to that cross with Jesus. The Romans put a sign above His head saying, "King of the Jews." Wasn't He? Where was His promised throne? Wasn't His Kingdom going to last forever? Did her heart cry out, *Son, why won't you save yourself?* But Jesus said nothing in His defense, and the most broken of all hearts in the crowd had to be that of His mother.

Have you ever wondered if it was Mary who lovingly wove Jesus the rare tunic without seams? The tunic the Centurions who crucified Jesus were throwing dice for? Whether she did or not, to watch your child's clothing gambled for as He was being unjustly executed would certainly bring unspeakable anguish.

Mary agonizing with Jesus at His death must have been deeply intense and personal. She showed great courage simply by being there. Perhaps only a mother who has unjustly lost a child to violence could come close to understanding her pain. Mary gave birth to Jesus, hidden in a dirty stable, with Joseph as her only witness. Now she was with Jesus at His death, on a dirty cross, on a busy highway. Big, brave Peter lied three times to distance himself. But Mary's sister was with her, and Mary Magdalene, and the disciple, John. They were the only ones close to Jesus who were mentioned.

The Bible says,

"When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home." (Jn 19:26,27)

Having provided for His mother's care, Jesus died.

Did Mary see Jesus after His resurrection? He walked the earth for 40 days appearing to His disciples and many others, so it's probable He appeared to His mother. We do know Mary continued on as part of the Early Church. She is mentioned at a prayer meeting in the Upper Room where,

"They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus..." (Acts 1:13,14)

It was the room where Jesus had eaten his last supper.

Mary's turbulent life built within her a deep treasure of experience, wisdom and trust. Surely she used it to encourage the faith of the young believers around her. I can imagine a group pressed close to Mary saying, "Please tell us again about your visitation -- and Gabriel, and Elizabeth, and the stable, and Joseph's angelic dreams, and..."

We know the persecution of the Early Church was intense. But Mary was again willing to be in the center of dangerous controversy. She again put her life on the line to follow God. Her reputation was given up years before to endure gossip, hardship and unfair judgments. She bravely watched her son and her Savior executed as a common criminal. Mary was continually willing to pay the price to be on the cutting edge of God's desire for the ages.

Mary spoke truly when as a teenager she said "I am the Lord's servant." She said yes and never took it back.

Who she was, how she chose to live, and what she stood for will always remain to inspire and challenge all believers to walk strongly and humbly with God.

Yes, Mary was blessed among all women. But to whom much is given, much is required. Her personal sacrifice for that honor is something no other woman will ever have to make. For this and much more, Mary's faith and devotion to God is eternally worthy of our honor and imitation. Her life is also an example of God's faithfulness to us when we follow Him.

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Painting of Mary, "The Overshadowing" by Ron DiCianni.

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Mary of Nazareth,  
Teenager of Courage  
by Melody Green

## Mary of Nazareth

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Let's take a look at the life of Mary, the young teenage girl God hand-picked to be the mother of Jesus. Her incredible life was more heroic and more intriguing than most of us realize.

The Lord has been putting Mary of Nazareth on my heart for many years as one of the most faithful and devoted young women of all time. Still I usually forget about her except at Christmas, when I set up my nativity and put her statue next to Joseph and baby Jesus.

I realize everyone who loves Jesus might not totally agree on certain aspects about the life of Mary. But that shouldn't obscure the treasure and example Mary's life holds. Especially for young people. There are facts so clearly outlined in the Bible that believers of every age should seek to imitate the incredible faith, devotion and trust of this young, simple Jewish girl.

It might be hard to put yourself in Mary's shoes. If you're a woman it will be difficult because society is so different today. If you're a man it will be even more difficult. But I ask each of you, just for a moment, to try to put yourself in Mary's situation.

We don't realize what it cost Mary to say yes to God. But let's go back to that time in Israel's history and count the cost with Mary -- or as she was called in Hebrew, Miryam.

### Close Your Eyes And Imagine...

Your name is Mary. You are a young Jewish girl and most historians agree you're between the age of 12 and 14. You have long dark hair and Mediterranean features. You live in Nazareth, a small sleepy village in the Galilee region of the middle east. Everybody knows everybody in Nazareth. Life is difficult there because of harsh Roman rule -- but you labor with your family to survive. You may not be wealthy, but you're rich in other ways. You've been raised in a devout Jewish home, you know God's Laws, and you love Him with all your heart.

Girls in your world aren't taught to read or write, and they marry young. So your focus, besides serving God, is to marry a good Jewish man and be an honorable wife and mother. You've been trained all your life for this -- learning to cook, weave, clean, harvest, care for children, to prepare for the Sabbath meal and the more elaborate holiday feasts.

And like all Jewish people, you wait for the promised Messiah to come deliver you from bondage. You can't actually read the prophecies, but you've heard them so often at synagogue or at family meals you've memorized many of them. How often might you think, *Oh if the Messiah would only come rescue us soon!* How could you even imagine that as a poor, unmarried teenager you would be part of God's mysterious plan to do just that?

Now imagine that a godly man named Joseph asks your father for your hand. Suddenly you're engaged -- a legal contract so binding only divorce can dissolve it. You're not actually married or intimate, but you've vowed your fidelity to Joseph. If you're found with another man, even during engagement, it would be considered adultery, and Joseph

could have you stoned to death. You'd seen it happen to others, but you weren't worried. You were pure and had no desire to change that. This is a very exciting and joyous time in your life. A big wedding is being planned and you're about to fulfill all your dreams!

### Sovereign Vessel

What you didn't know when you got engaged to Joseph, was that you were a sovereign vessel of the Lord. Of course, sovereign vessels are chosen very carefully. No just any devoted Jewish virgin would do when it came to conceiving and raising God's only Son -- the Savior of the world. God wanted a girl He could trust all the way to the end. Someone who'd already proven her character. God wanted the very best.

And what made Mary the best? That question reminds me of a movie I saw years ago. An allegory. God needed someone for an important job on earth. The angel Gabriel said to God, "Do you want the smartest or the holiest?" God quipped, "I want the holiest. I can *make* them smart!" This reminds me of Mary. God knew her godly devotion to Him would carry her through the turbulent course her life would take. That she could faithfully endure to the end.

### She Said Yes

Now imagine this. You're all alone, perhaps thinking about your upcoming marriage and an angel appears to you with some startling news.

*"God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth... to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid. Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'" (Lk 1:26-33)*

This was a staggering thing for anyone to hear. Especially a young teenager! Surely Mary had felt the powerful presence of God before, in her own times of worship and the religious services in her Jewish community. She was familiar with His presence. She *knew* God.

Still, she had a question. And I like that. She was not afraid to ask questions. It showed she was a learner. And smart. It was a practical question, not one of doubt.

*"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" "The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'" (Lk 1:34,35)*

Then Gabriel threw in a bit more information. Perhaps he knew Mary might want to check it out.

*"Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." (Lk 1:36,37)*

You could probably hear a pin drop. Mary had a moment to respond. Yes or no. What would it be? Have you ever had to make a decision you knew would change your life forever? I'm sure Mary quickly counted the cost of being pregnant before she was married -- her reputation, Joseph, her family, even possible death. She couldn't know the whole cost, but she knew enough to make an informed decision. Besides, she could feel the holy presence of God. She was willing.

*"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." (Lk 1:38)*

### What Did Mary's "Yes" Cost?

Mary's decision could have put her, and her family, and Joseph in the path of a horrendous scandal. A scandal that could take her life. And what would she tell Joseph? Was it safe to share with anyone? Maybe she thought, I'll just say "I'm pregnant...but I'm still a virgin." Right. How about, "Well, actually God put this baby in my womb. It's His Son Jesus. Oh, and He is the Messiah we're all waiting for.." Did she think anyone would believe her? Did she worry about Joseph's reaction? Did she care? One thing was for sure: When her pregnancy became obvious it would look like she had committed adultery unless God intervened.

So Mary did what most of us would do. She immediately left town! I don't think she wanted to face anyone. I think she needed to gather her composure and thoughts before seeing Joseph. Also, the angel told her Elizabeth was pregnant. If I were Mary, I'd want to see that for myself. It takes awhile to know if you're pregnant. What if you'd only had an overly spiritual experience with absolutely no substance? Why risk rejection and death? Wisdom says, before you open your mouth, check it out.

The Bible says,

*"Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed:*

*"Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." (Lk 1:39-45)*

Within moments the truth was confirmed. Then from Mary's lips tumbles one of the most beautiful and humble prayers recorded in the Bible. Remember she is 12-14 years old and cannot read. Her spontaneous prayer gives us a window into her heart -- and an inkling of why God picked her above all others. No one, of any age, could have prayed this without having a deep intimacy with their God. Mary said,

*"My soul glorifies the Lord  
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior  
For he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant  
From now on all generations  
will call me blessed*

*For the Mighty One has done  
great things for me  
Holy is his name  
His mercy extends to those who fear him  
From generation to generation  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm  
He has scattered those who are proud  
in their inmost thoughts  
He has brought down rulers  
from their thrones  
But has lifted up the humble  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
But has sent the rich away empty  
He has helped his servant Israel  
Remembering to be merciful  
To Abraham and his descendants forever  
Even as he said to our fathers."  
(Lk 1:46-55)*

From our lips our heart speaks. Mary could finally rejoice! She was now 100% certain her visitation wasn't a dream. And seeing Zechariah using frantic sign language was perhaps a humorous postscript. When the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah, a well read priest, to tell him his barren wife would conceive, unlike Mary he doubted. To make his point, Gabriel left him unable to speak until the day their son would be born.

### Facing Joseph

Mary stayed with Elizabeth three months then went home. She'd had time to pray and was ready to face Joseph, her family and everyone else. It's unclear if Mary said anything, or if her pregnancy just became obvious. But when Joseph found out he didn't want to marry her. He didn't want her stoned to death or publicly disgraced either, so he planned to divorce her quietly. He must have wondered who the father was and been heartbroken to feel so betrayed by a girl he trusted and most likely loved deeply. His beautiful, faithful Mary... *pregnant!* Mary must have been devastated, too. She was willing to bear the injustice, but I imagine she cried out to God with a desperate "it's now or never" kind of prayer. She trusted God to defend her. He did.

The Lord sent an angel to Joseph in a dream.

*"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." (Mt 1:20,21)*

Not a lot is known about Joseph. But he too was obviously hand selected by God -- to take care of Mary and raise Jesus -- and to hear and obey God the many times He would give him guidance during their lifetime.

So Joseph took Mary as his wife. God provided care and protection through Joseph, but all of Nazareth must have still questioned her pregnancy. Did Mary tell people what happened? She clearly wasn't into protecting herself -- but she would protect the holy seed of God. It must have been difficult for her and Joseph to endure the constant gossip and speculation. But God was about to send them away from Nazareth, for awhile anyway.