

This week in our look at some of the overlooked women of the bible to see what we can learn from their stories, I want to think about Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The often misunderstood Mary was a major character in the divine drama of Jesus' birth. Mary plays two widely differing roles among Catholics and Protestants.

From my perspective, it seems to me that many Catholics overestimate the role of Mary. According to Catholic teaching, "God has committed to Mary the treasury of all good things, in order that through her are obtained every hope, every grace, and all salvation." (Pope Pius, IX) Another Pope has put it this way: "It is the will of God that we should have nothing which has not passed through the hands of Mary." (Pius, XII).

There was a push in the 1990's among some Catholics for the Pope to declare Mary the "Co-Redeemer, Mediator of All Graces, and Advocate for the People of God." (Christianity Today, 12/8

Before I say what I want to say next, please understand that I am not a Catholic-basher. I care deeply for those who are Catholic, many have a deep and profound faith that I would love to have. However, it must be clearly taught Mary has no place in our redemption or salvation. It is only by the shed blood of Jesus that you and I can have forgiveness of sin and open access to God the Father. Mary is not a co-redemptorist or a mediator. She needed to have her sins forgiven, just like we do. We must be careful not to give to Mary that which belongs only to Jesus.

The Underestimated Mary

Now, let me be quick to add that while many Catholics overestimate Mary's importance and attribute things to her that are not taught in the Bible, most Protestants underestimate her importance. Many of us allow her a cameo appearance in Christmas cards, carols, and nativity scenes, but then we tuck her away like a Christmas ornament, out of sight, out of mind, until her reappearance next December. Mary is often the victim of simple neglect, having been abandoned to a kind

of evangelical limbo. Some of us have consigned her to virtual oblivion.

As we will see this morning, Mary did play a crucial role in God's plan, and we will be spiritually impoverished if we ignore her.

My goal this morning is not to bash Catholics or Protestants. If you're itching for a theological gunfight, you'll be disappointed. My goal is simply to try and answer this question: Based upon what the Bible teaches, what relevance does Mary's faith have for us today?

Mary was not wealthy. She was probably not well educated (she might have even been illiterate). She was unknown outside of her home town during most of her lifetime. Yet she had an inner beauty that even impressed God! Her inner beauty was so powerful that she was chosen to become the mother of the most important person of all times: God's own Son, Jesus. 1 Samuel 16:7 *But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."*

What was it that made Mary stand out? It was her heart, and how it responded in faith and obedience to God.

God's favour rests upon those who respond in faith

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her she was "highly favoured," or as another translation puts it, she was God's "favoured one." Mary was favoured not just because of what she was *about to do* in being the mother of Jesus, but because of what she *had already done*. She had proven herself faithful.

What I want us to notice here is that God's favour came to Mary even though she came from a modest, if not poor, family. God chose her even though she grew up in a remote region of the world, in a tiny village called Nazareth with only a few hundred people. God favoured Mary because of the inner beauty of her faith and obedience. God's favour is upon those who exhibit faith and obedience.

It doesn't matter how old you are, whether you are a child, a teen, or an elderly person. Mary was in her teens, Abraham was around 80 when God first called him. It doesn't matter where you come from, you might come from the country, the city, the suburbs. It doesn't matter how clever you are, or what your family life is. It doesn't matter how much money you make. God looks at our faith.

We talk a lot about faith in the church, but what is faith?

Faith Is...

Believing that What God Says is true

After the angel visited (pic of the two women) Mary and told her she would bear God's Son, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who herself was pregnant with a boy who would become John the Baptist. Listen to Elizabeth's response during Mary's visit with her. Elizabeth said:

NIV Luke 1:45 Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

That is Faith! Faith is believing that what the Lord has said will be accomplished, or that the Lord will do what he said he would do. We have to remember that the angel Gabriel told Mary something which was totally impossible, first that she would have a son who would be named Jesus. She hadn't had sex with Joseph or any other man yet, she was a virgin, so how could she have a child? But the impossible thing was that this child would be the Son of God. How could a human woman bear God's Son, a divine being? Impossible. Gabriel told her that (*picture of elephant on a tightrope*) the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her. Not a lot of details there. Gabriel then reminds us, "With God nothing is impossible." In other words, the angel was telling her God can and would do the impossible if she had faith. And Mary believed. She said, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said."

God told Mary he was going to do the impossible and Mary believed, she had faith, she trusted that God would make her conceive a child even before she saw the evidence of her pregnancy.

The author of the book of Hebrews defined faith in a similar manner:

Hebrews 11:1 *What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see. 2 God gave his approval to people in days of old because of their faith.*

Hebrews 11:6 *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

God gave his favour or approval to those who had faith. People like Mary who were sure and certain of God's promise even if they did not see it. Notice it says it is impossible to please God without faith. God continues to give his favour to those who have faith and trust in God's promises today.

Promises like:

NIV Romans 8:28 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Do you believe God works everything for your good if you love him and follow his calling, even when things in your life seem to be going poorly?

NIV John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Do you believe God loves you and sent his Son to give you eternal life?

Rom 10:9 *That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be*

saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

Do you believe God raised Jesus from the dead and will one day raise you to be with him?

NLT Romans 3:24-25 Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. 25 For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us.

Do you believe God has forgiven you through Jesus Christ?

Without faith it is impossible to please God. We must believe what God has said if we are to receive His promises.

Faith is believing and it is also

Active – Mary was willing to endure many things to be a servant

But faith is more than believing something to be true with my mind. Faith must also impact how we live our lives. My actions should reflect what I believe. Faith is active. I must do things differently and behave differently because I believe that what God said is true. I can believe people have walked on the moon, or that George Washington was the first president of the United States of America because it is true, but this kind of belief doesn't change my life. It doesn't make any demands upon me. Unfortunately, we sometimes treat our faith in God in this way, if I believe in my head that something is true I have belief. To believe something is true in your head, and to act as though it is true are two different things, and yet faith incorporates both of these.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary she would miraculously bear a child from the Holy Spirit, not only did she believe it would happen, but she also adjusted her life with God's. She responded with a willingness to do whatever God wanted her to do, in this case she

accepted the immense responsibility of bearing the Christ child and raising him in the ways of the Lord. Mary's response was, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." Mary didn't just believe the impossible would happen, she was willing to be a vessel by which God would accomplish his divine plan.

Consider for a moment the ramifications of Mary's response.

By her willingness to serve the Lord:

- Mary was trusting that her soon to be husband, Joseph, would believe her story of the visitation of an angel, and of the miraculous pregnancy. She was trusting that Joseph would not seek a divorce, forcing her to raise a child on her own in a society in which illegitimate children were looked up with particular disfavour, and not usually cared for.
- Mary was willing to be the gossip of the town because she was pregnant before marriage. Either she would have been ridiculed for being with Joseph in their betrothal period, or if Joseph divorced her, she would have been compared with a prostitute, because it meant she had an affair during her betrothal to Joseph. Imagine the gossip in the sleepy little town of Nazareth where everybody knew everybody.

No matter what way you look at it, it was going to be tough for Mary, but because of her faith in God, that he would work it out, she was willing to put her faith in action.

Look what comes later for Mary: a long journey to Bethlehem where Jesus was born; visits from shepherds; blessings from Anna and Simeon at the Temple; wise men bringing strange gifts; becoming a refugee in Egypt; losing Jesus only to find him in the temple; his public ministry and teaching where, at times, his family thought he was mad; Jesus' arrest and crucifixion – how must Mary have felt seeing that? Mary's life wasn't easy. It was full of challenges – things that could have shaken her faith. But then imagine what she felt when she saw Jesus resurrected and realised that everything she had been promised was true.

What kind of faith is it if I believe in God, I believe Jesus was God's Son born of the Virgin Mary, and I believe Jesus spoke the truth, that he died and rose from the dead so that I can be forgiven, and what if I believe God has promises of abundant life, and eternal life, but then go about living my life as if it doesn't matter. If I claim to have faith in God but it makes no difference to how I live, it is not faith. Faith implies a willingness to follow God and to live in a way that honours him.

Faith is more than believing in our head. Faith involves our actions. Will we live our life differently because of what we believe? Will I change my priorities so they are in line with God's? Am I willing to allow God to change my character to be like his? Will I prioritize my time and money the way God wants me to? Will I love God and others by treating those around me like Jesus would, including my spouse, my children, my co-workers, and neighbours? Being a willing servant may mean sacrifice.

Jesus brother James writes in his letter:

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Our faith should affect our head, our heart, our hands and our wallets. Our head, what we believe about God, about Jesus. Our heart, we should have compassion for others, we should love others including our enemies. And our hands, what we do and the resources to do it.