

Mary

Mother of Jesus

HER NAME MAY MEAN
"Bitterness"

HER CHARACTER: She was a virgin from a poor family in an obscure village in Galilee. Her response to Gabriel reveals a young woman of unusual faith and humility. Her unqualified yes to God's plan for her life entailed great personal risk and suffering. She must have endured seasons of confusion, fear, and darkness as the events of her life unfolded. She is honored, not only as the mother of Jesus, but as his first disciple.

HER SORROW: To see the son she loved shamed and tortured, left to die like the worst kind of criminal.

HER JOY: To see her child raised from the dead; to have received the Holy Spirit along with Christ's other disciples.

KEY SCRIPTURES: Matthew 1:18–25; 2; Luke 1:26–80; 2:1–52; John 19:25–27

Monday

HER STORY

*S*he sat down on the bench and closed her eyes, an old woman silhouetted against the blue Jerusalem sky. Even the wood beneath her conjured images. Though she could no longer recall the exact curl of his smile or the shape of his sleeping face resting next to hers, she could still see the rough brown hands, expertly molding the wood to his purposes. Joseph had been a good carpenter and an even better husband.

These days the memories came unbidden, like a gusty wind carrying her away to other times and places. Some said drowning people see their lives unfold in incredible detail just before they die. Age had a similar effect, she thought, except that you could relive your memories with a great deal more leisure ...

A cool breeze teased at her skirts as she balanced the jug on her head, making her way toward the well. A stranger, she noticed, was approaching from the opposite direction. Even in the dusky light, his clothes shone, as though bleached bright by the strongest of fuller's soap.

"Greetings," he shouted, "you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

No Nazarene, she was sure, would ever dare greet a maiden like that. But with each step his words grew bolder, not softer, rushing toward her like water cascading over a cliff:

"Do not be afraid, Mary....

You have found favor with God....

You will give birth to a son....

He will be called the Son of the Most High....

The Holy Spirit will come upon you....

Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age."

Wave after wave broke over her as she listened to the angel's words—first confusion and fear, then awe and gratitude, and finally a rush of joy and peace. Her whole being drenched in light. Then she heard more words, this time cascading from her lips, not his:

"I am the Lord's servant.

May it be to me as you have said."

Though the angel departed, Mary's peace remained. The Most High had visited the lowliest of his servants and spoken the promise every Jewish woman longed to hear: "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 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."

The moon hung like a smile in the night sky as Mary lifted the brimming buckets and began walking across the fields. As the water swayed and splashed to the rhythm of her movements, she realized that she too felt full and satisfied—as though she had just finished a favorite meal. Questions, she knew, would come with the morning. For now, it was enough to look up at the stars and know that God was at work shaping her future.

“Mama, Mama,” he yelled, running toward her, chubby arms flung out beseechingly.

“Jesus, what is it now, child?” she smiled, scooping the chunky boy into her arms before he could topple over in the usual tangle of arms and legs. But he was all kisses, squealing and nuzzling his curly head against her breast, as though to bury himself in her soft, warm flesh. She sighed contentedly. How many mothers had she known? But none had adequately described the sheer wonder of a child—the laughter, the constant surprise, the tenderness. Not to mention the fear and worry that were also part of the bargain.

But this was no time to entertain such thoughts. The men from the East had recently left. How strange these Magi seemed, with their tales of a star that had led them all the way to Bethlehem in search of a new king. They had bowed before her dark-eyed child, laying out their treasures of gold, incense, and myrrh—as though paying homage to royalty. One morning, however, they had packed in haste, saying only that a dream had warned them to return home without reporting news of their successful search to King Herod. Even the mention of that king’s name had filled her with dread. Bethlehem lay just six miles south of Jerusalem—dangerously close to the man who had murdered his own children out of jealousy for his throne. How would such a ruler respond to rumors of a child-king in Bethlehem?

Two nights ago Joseph had shaken her awake, shushing her with details of the dream he had just had: “Mary, an angel appeared to me. We must leave before sunrise. Herod plans to search for our child and kill him!”

Now they were on their way to Egypt, reversing the steps of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, who had led her ancestors to freedom so long ago. Mary wondered, as they rested, if they would ever see their homeland again.

“Woman,” he breathed the word softly, painfully, through lips encrusted with blood, his lean arms flung out on either side of him, as though imploringly. The palms of his hands were pinned with spikes. He looked at her first and then at the young man standing beside her. “Here is your son.” The words came haltingly.

Then to the man, he sighed: “Here is your mother.”

She wanted to reach for him with all the might of her love, to bury his sorrow in her breasts, to tell him he was the son she needed most. Would not the God who pitied Abraham also pity her? Would he allow her to suffer what even the patriarch had been spared—the sacrifice of a child? All her life she had loved the God whose angel had spoken to her, calling her “highly favored.” But how could a woman whose son was dying on a Roman cross ever consider herself “favored”?

Suddenly her own words came back to her, as though a younger version of herself was whispering them in her ear: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

The midday sky had blackened, but she could still see her son’s twisted form on the cross, his eyes searching hers. Thorns circled his forehead in the shape of a crown, a crude reminder of the sign the Roman governor had fastened to the wood: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”

She thought of the Magi and their priceless gifts. The gold and incense, royal treasures that had helped them survive their stay in Egypt. She had always wondered about the myrrh. Now she knew—it was embalming oil for the king the wise men had come to worship.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” His cry pierced her. The earth shook violently and she fell to her knees, barely able to complete the words of the psalm for the man who hung dead on the cross:

O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent....
But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads....
Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you
even at my mother's breast.
From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God....
They have pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.
But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me....
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! ...
Future generations will be told about the Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness
to a people yet unborn—
for he has done it.

—Psalm 22

By the time Mary opened her eyes, the setting sun had turned the city into a golden land. She smiled, wiping the tears from her wrinkled face. How true the angel's words had been. No woman from Eve onward had ever been blessed as she, the mother of the Messiah, had been. Yes, the past was alive inside her, but it was the future that filled her with joy. Soon, she would see her son again and this time it would be *his* hands that would wipe away the last of her tears.

ANGELS

*M*ary cowered in fear when the angel Gabriel appeared to her—not an uncommon reaction. Most often in Scripture, when an angel appeared to a human being, the reaction was one of fright. While we're not told exactly what angels look like or how they appear, one description in Matthew's gospel says the angel's "appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow" (Matthew 28:3). Certainly it's obvious from the reactions of those who saw them that angels are supernatural beings and therefore frightening.

The 291 references to angels in Scripture give us a varied picture of their duties. Angels in heaven stand before God's throne and worship him (Revelation 5:11–12). An angel helped Hagar and Ishmael when they were in trouble in the desert (Genesis 21:17). An angel freed the apostles from prison (Acts 5:19). An angel directed Philip to the desert road where he met and witnessed to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26). An angel appeared to Paul to comfort him (Acts 27:23–24), to Elijah when he was worn out and discouraged in the desert (1 Kings 19:3–9), and to Daniel and his friends in places of danger (Daniel 3:28; 6:22). Sometimes God uses angels to punish his enemies (Genesis 19:1; 2 Kings 19:35).

Angels played an important role in the life of Jesus. After first appearing to Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph, angels announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds (Luke 2:9). Angels came and ministered to Jesus after he was tempted in the desert (Matthew 4:11) and when he was in the garden just before his crucifixion (Luke 22:43). A violent earthquake accompanied the angel that came to earth and rolled back the stone over Jesus' tomb (Matthew 28:2). When Jesus ascended into heaven, two angels, "men dressed in white" (Acts 1:10), told the disciples he would be coming back in the same way.

In the book of Revelation, John describes a glorious scene: "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled

the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’” (Revelation 5:11–12).

Imagine the sight: hundreds of thousands of beings—purest white, like lightning—all moving in concert around God’s throne. Listen: Can you imagine their loud, supernatural voices praising Jesus? *Worthy is the Lamb!* Then “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them” (Revelation 5:13) will join in with them, singing the same song of praise. What a sight! What a sound! Mary will be there praising her son. Will you be there praising your Savior?

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read Luke 1:26–38.

1. Imagine yourself in Mary’s place. What thoughts and feelings go through your mind when you hear what Gabriel says in verse 28? Verse 31? Verses 32–33? Verse 35?
2. Which part of this would be hardest for you to accept with the calm and humility Mary expresses in verse 38? Why?

Read Luke 1:46–55.

3. What does Mary’s song tell you about her character and the things that are important to her?

Read John 19:25–30.

4. Imagine Mary watching her son die and remembering her song from Luke 1:46–55. How would that song sound to her now?
5. In what circumstance do you need to say to God, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said”? What makes that hard or easy for you to say?

HER PROMISE

*W*hen God says nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37), he means it. He is all-powerful, omnipotent, the Savior of the world. No matter what he has promised, no matter how hard or impossible that promise seems to fulfill, he can and will do it.

Promises in Scripture

For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over.... He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God.

—JOSHUA 4:23–24

With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

—MATTHEW 19:26

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

—1 CORINTHIANS 1:25

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.

—LUKE 1:28

- REFLECT ON: Luke 1:26–38.
- PRAISE GOD: That nothing is impossible with him.
- OFFER THANKS: That a woman's body became the dwelling place of divinity.
- CONFESS: Any tendency to devalue yourself as a woman.
- ASK GOD: To make you a woman, like Mary, who brings Jesus into the world by expressing his character, power, forgiveness, and grace.

Lift Your Heart

Choose one episode in the life of Mary—her encounter with Gabriel, the birth of her child, the scene with the shepherds, the presentation in the temple, the Magi's visit, the escape to Egypt, her son's agony on the cross, or her presence with the disciples in the upper room. Imagine yourself in her place. What are your struggles, your joys? What thoughts run through your mind? Does anything or anyone take you by surprise?

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your reflections, to help you imagine the sounds, sights, and smells that will bring each scene to life. Let the Scriptures feed your soul with a deeper understanding of God's intention for your life. Pray for the grace to be like the woman who said: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

My soul is full of you, my God, and I cannot hold back my gladness. Everyone who sees me will call me blessed because you have noticed me. You saw my lowliness and my need and filled my emptiness with your presence. Form your likeness in me so that, like Mary, I can bring you into a world that desperately needs your love. In the name of Mary's son I pray. Amen.