

“GREAT WOMEN OF THE BIBLE -- MARY”

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Luke 2:15-19

It's a paradox of no mean proportion that the best known woman of the Bible is barely mentioned there. As a matter of fact, as one commentator observes,

“When we escape from the weary labyrinth of legend with which the fancy of centuries has surrounded the name of Mary, and confine our attention to those things actually said about her in the gospel record, we inevitably suffer some disappointment on discovering how little we really know about the mother of Jesus. Compared with the picture of her son which comes to us through this Book, the New Testament portrait of the virgin is but a dim shadow, flipping across the page for a moment here and there, and then fading away into total obscurity.”

Actually, she is only mentioned fifteen times in the Bible after the account of the events which took place in Bethlehem. Apart from her conversion with the angel, and her reciting of the glorious “Magnificat,” there are only two passages in the entire New Testament recording anything she said. Once when Jesus was lost in the temple, and a second incident surrounding the wedding in Cana of Galilee. The apostle Paul, who received his gospel directly from the Lord Jesus, does not even mention her name.

It's a simple fact that the dependable, Biblical, historical data regarding the mother of our Lord is “astonishingly meager.” Yet she remains the best known, and perhaps the best loved, of all the great women of the Bible.

Actually, the story of Mary is the story of Jesus all over again, told from another point of view. The events which make his a tale to remember, the virgin birth, the virtuous life, the vicarious death, and the victorious resurrection, are all part of her narrative, too. To rehearse those

happenings so well known and beloved by all of us, is not necessary this morning. But I believe real profit can be gained by focusing our gaze upon some of those traits of character in which she excelled, and which the story of her life unveils.

Her Humility

Not the least of these is her humility. Never once did Mary forget she was just a simple village maiden. She was given an honor more grand than any bestowed upon all other women, being, as she was, the human channel through which the incarnation took place. But even though she was cognizant of this wonder of wonders, never once did she speak of herself in a boastful way.

As a matter of fact, when she did speak of herself, she used the lowliest of terms, “handmaiden.” She took the term “bond-servant,” and using its feminine form she seemed to say, “I’m God’s slave. Nothing more.” Yet it was a position she accepted with joy.

I don’t mean to make light of the role she played. No woman has ever played a more important one. To quote one commentator,

“We must not allow ourselves to entertain a grudge against the mother of Jesus just because some enthusiasts for her have given her more than her due.”

I am simply saying *Mary* never exalted herself. The truly remarkable thing about this humble village maiden is that while she was indeed, “blessed among women,” she never once attributed any glory to herself. “My soul doth magnify the *Lord*,” is the great hymn of praise she sang. Her thoughts were turned away from herself, to him from whom all blessings flow.

It is one of the remarkable, and also sad, things in Christian history that this one who thought so little of herself has been lifted up, and made an object of worship, with prayers said to her and incense waved before her. Mary would be the first to repudiate such idolatry. She would also be the last to attribute any supernatural significance to herself.

Nor would the New Testament support the giving of any such station, or standing to this village lass. Instead, the New Testament carefully plays her down. The gospel writers bring her to center stage for that brief part of the great drama in which she has a role. Then, when the babe has been born, reared, and released to the world, they “write her out of the script” as it were. The Bible leaves no doubt about the fact that, “there is no other name given among men whereby ye must be saved, but the name of Jesus.”

While some of Mary’s admirers have forgotten that fact, Mary never did. She was beautifully and sweetly humble through it all. Never once did she attribute glory to herself. Rather, in every act and attitude, she directed our thoughts away from herself to that One who was not only her son, but also *her personal Savior*.

Her Faith

A second of those qualities in which she excelled was the element of faith, which was evidenced. In at least three ways. First --

Her Incredible Response To The Angel

Now reason with me --

if *you* find the incarnation difficult to comprehend,
if the virgin birth is something over which *you* stumble,
if it’s hard for *you* to believe the infant son of this peasant woman is none other than the messiah,

what do you think it must have been *for Mary*?

“How can these things be?” she asked the angel. “It is impossible that I could bear a child, I have known no man.”

If she had looked upon this heavenly visitor as a mere apparition, and dismissed him with a quizzical smile and shake of the head, we would thoroughly understand. But when she *believes* him, when, without the slimmest shred of evidence to support the angel’s grand announcement

she accepts what the angel implies, we can't help but marvel at Mary's faith.

Rarely, if ever, has there been a belief to equal hers. If Abraham's faith, in much more believable circumstances, made him the father of all who believe, then surely Mary's faith entitles her to be called the mother of all who believe.

If, as our Lord asserts, no mighty work can be done where there is unbelief -- and if we may safely reason that where there has been a mighty work done there has also been a corresponding and cooperating faith -- then I don't think we can ever overestimate the measure of Mary's faith.

It was as pure and firm as faith ever was. And the blessings which have accrued to mankind's account as a result of her simple trust and belief, simply add substance to the angel's grand assertion regarding her, “Blessed art thou among women.”

In addition to her believing attitude toward the angel's assessment, another measure of her faith is the manner in which she met the utterly bewildering events which jammed the life of her son.

From the day Jesus was born, until the day he died, Mary was called upon to walk by faith and not by sight.

Instead of being born in a palace, this Prince of Peace gave his first birth cry in a roughhewn stable, chiseled out of a limestone wall.

Instead of going from glory to glory until he ultimately mounted a throne, he journeyed from rebuff to rebuff until ultimately he hung on a cross.

And yet, never once in all those years of what must have been unbelievable bewilderment, did Mary falter in her faith. From the manger to the cross she maintained her trust, believing somehow, *in spite of all the evidence to the contrary*, that God was in the field and, in a most mysterious way, was working his wonders to perform.

Hers was a tremendous feat of faith which challenges the noblest and best in us.

We, too, are called upon to have faith in God.

We, too, are asked to believe God can, and *will*, take care of our future.

We, too, are urged to believe his hand is still on the helm of our world,

that he has not abandoned either it or us, and, in his own good time,
we shall see “all things working together for good.”

Admittedly, there are times when such faith is hard. When the so-called facts of the case do not seem to warrant such commitment. But experience has shown life to be worth living. And when it is supported by *that* kind of faith, a solidarity and stability are added which enable us to see *through* “the dark and dim unknown,” and find *God* amidst the shadows, “keeping watch above his own.”

It need not be a large faith to begin with, and what an encouragement that is to me personally! What a help it has been to know a conviction no larger than a mustard seed -- for my faith is often just that small -- is all it takes to get the job done.,

How helpful it has been to know the law of life is that things beget their kind. Faith begets faith. Trust begets trust. Belief begets belief. And if you start with whatever measure of faith you have, *and use it*, it will grow, until, like Mary’s faith, it looms larger than all the bewildering uncertainties which crop up along your path.

Perhaps the most significant expression of her unfaltering faith is given in the last thing she is recorded as saying. She *appears* on several occasions after this, but this is the last occasion where she *speaks*, and her words have been preserved for us.

The scene is the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (Jn. 2:5). I’m sure you recall the story of how, as the feast progressed, they found the wedding wine in short supply, and Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water into wine. But I wonder if you recall what his mother *said* on that

occasion? It's by way of instruction to the servants, but it's also a powerful affirmation of faith --

“*Whatever he says to you . . . do it!*”

These are the last recorded words of the virgin mother. They not only stand out as a titanic testimony to her trust in *Jesus*, they also provide a clue to all of the puzzling situations which confront *you*.

I say to you this morning, no matter how troubling and complex your circumstances may be, Jesus is, and has, the answer. No matter how bewildering the maze through which you are called to walk may be, Jesus is, and knows, the way. Therefore, “*Whatever he says to you . . . do it!*” And know that in the doing, you are following the advice and example of Mary

who against hope believed in hope,
who staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief
but was strong in faith,

and as a result, had the joy and privilege of doing something glorious, both with and for God.

Her Courage

As a result of her faith, Mary was able to face life with courage. As one commentator puts it,

“She moved easily with the will of God.”

As a young virgin who found herself pregnant, Mary could not help but know of the public scorn and ridicule to which she would be subjected as a result of her condition. As a matter of fact, she knew it was likely that “being with child” she would be subjected to physical harm. According to Mosaic law, an unfaithful betrothed maiden was to be stoned to death.

But with serenity of mind and dedication of heart, Mary courageously moved along her path of destiny. Her humility gave birth to faith. Her faith gave birth to courage. And all three -- humility, faith and courage -- gave birth to inner peace.

There was nothing easy about her path, either during pregnancy or after. Not only did she have

the responsibility of rearing the son of God, but the New Testament is quite clear that as the wife of Joseph, she also gave birth to at least four other sons and several daughters. What a tribute to the purity and sanctity of the marriage relationship.

*God willed that the very same woman who gave birth to his Son,
should also give birth to other sons and daughters!*

When you add to *that* fact her family responsibilities -- including the deep conviction her first-born was the son of God -- you can see how the possibility of anxiety is incredibly increased.

Surely there must have been times when the baby Jesus had the same sicknesses all babies have.

Surely, as a boy, he must have shared those everyday trials typical of all boys.

Surely, as a young carpenter going out day-by-day to engage in quite un-Messiah like duties -- such as sawing boards and toting timbers -- he was exposed to all the dangers to life and limb lurking in the workplace..

And through it all, Mary, the *mother*, must have questioned their meaning. In fact, we *know* she did, for we are told how on more than one occasion,

“Mary pondered these things in her heart.”

Or as J. B. Phillips has it,

“She turned them over in her mind.”

But, the important thing to remember is that she *pondered* them, and was not panicked by them. She faced life with faith believing that,

“What God has promised he is able to perform.”

Therefore, she was able to confront life with courage. Confident there was significance and meaning to the bewildering events through which her son passed. Certain all things would work out well in the end.

Even --

when the opposition toward him mounted,
when she saw him hanging on a cross and must have suffered the despair
we all feel when it seems as if God's promises have failed,
when she suffered with and for her son as no other mother has ever suffered,
even *then*, Mary did not flinch.

Her faith gave her courage. She was with him to the end.

Observing how the slightest shift of posture sent a new rush of torture through his body.

Sensing the burning thirst.

Longing to cradle his throbbing head in her arms as she had done when he was a child.

Feeling, *in her bones*, the inexpressible agony of watching someone you love suffer.

Knowing there was absolutely nothing she could do to alleviate his pain.

This, and more, is what Mary witnessed. *This*, and more, is what Mary endured. *This*, and more, was the final bend in her Via Dolorosa. Her road of sorrows. But Mary met it unflinchingly, courageously, and yes, victoriously! For while it was her son who died, it was her savior who rose again! And the sunshine of Easter was all the brighter, because, with humility, faith, and courage, Mary had walked with Jesus through the cloud of Calvary.

Need I point out that you, too, will have your Via Dolorosa? Your road of sorrow. Need I point out that no home can hang a sign over its door saying, “No trouble here”? That no life, however Godly, is immune to the tragedies life sometimes brings? But let me lean across this sacred desk and call to your remembrance *that*, which in heartache, you may be prone to forget --

God is *still* on the throne.

What He has promised he is *still* able to perform.

His grace is *still* sufficient for thee

Faith *still* issues in courage.

And if, like Mary, you face your own private Calvary with humility, faith and courage, then, like Mary, you will also live to see the dawning of a brighter and a better day.