

The Cloud of Witnesses

Mary

Lesson 1: Mary – The Lord’s Servant

Reading

Luke 1:26-38.

The Lord’s Servant

What an amazing girl Mary was. Probably a young teenager and yet someone who knew her O.T. Bible and was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. Like everyone who meets an angel, she was completely overwhelmed when Gabriel arrived. What was an angel doing visiting her, let alone calling her *‘highly favoured’*? Mary lived at a time when God had appeared absent and silent. It was a time similar to when the Hebrews were in Egypt. They were also hoping and looking for a Messiah/Redeemer – to save them from the Romans this time rather than the Egyptians – as they felt equally down-trodden and helpless.

Six months earlier, after a visit from an angel called Gabriel, to Zechariah, her barren cousin Elizabeth became pregnant. This time it was Mary’s privilege to receive a visit. Wonder above all wonders, the message was that of all people she, Mary, would be the one chosen to bring the Word of God into the world through the miraculous incarnation.

And what was Mary’s response? Humble and contrite obedience. She offered her body and life to God without reservation. She didn’t wait to have everything explained to her; she didn’t ask for more time or sufficient finance to see it through – she gave herself and trusted God to do the rest.

Mary merely asked how she could possibly fulfil the role since she was so young and a virgin. In response Gabriel gave that eternity shattering declaration and promise – *Nothing is impossible with God*. What words of comfort – what words of hope – what words of ultimate power. *Nothing is impossible with God*.

Those words ring like bells down through the millennia and God repeats them to you and me today - *Nothing is impossible with God*. So, no matter what you are facing, no matter how ‘impossible’ the circumstances may seem, remember Gabriel’s words to Mary – for God would say them to you today - *Nothing is impossible with God*.

What a wonderful reply Mary gave – the one God longs to hear from each one of us – the one that I feel sure prompted Paul to write Romans 12:1 –

“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” She surrendered her present,

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 1 continued: Mary – The Lord's Servant

sacrificed her reputation and forfeited her future to God, whatever the cost might be. The only thing that mattered was God's perfect will.

Like Mary, we all need to get to the position of offering our lives – our bodies – to God. He is looking for absolute trust and obedience from each one of us and it begins when we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to Him.

Is it any wonder that God chose Mary and indeed was able to use her for such an awesome role? Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 6 – our bodies are a Temple of the Holy Spirit. So, in a sense, we are the re-incarnation of God today as Jesus was then. We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit as Jesus was so that we may be the body of Christ on earth today – taking and being 'Jesus' wherever we go.

If Mary was blessed to be the mother of Jesus, how much more blessed are we to be a Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Mary would say to us today...

The greatest time in my life began when I gave everything I was to God – body, soul and spirit – to be used in His service.

Prayer

Father, please forgive me for those times when I want all the answers before I'm prepared to be obedient to Your call and requests. Help me to be more like Mary and to offer You all I am and have without reservation. In Jesus Name and for His glory. Amen.

Additional readings

Matthew 1:18-24; Romans 12:1; Luke 9:57-62; Matthew 7:15-23.

Questions

What stops us trusting God?

How do we get to the point where we offer everything we have and are to God?

What does God want you to do for Him in the coming year?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2: Mary – The Pondering Parent

Reading

Luke 2:1-20.

The Pondering Parent

The Birth of Jesus was un-natural in many ways. Not only was Mary a virgin, but the circumstances of Jesus' birth were unusual. Mary and Joseph had to leave their village and travel by foot and donkey over 100kms to Bethlehem in order to register for the census.

Mary was heavily pregnant for all that harrowing journey. (She was probably no more than a couple of weeks off from delivery.) Everything had gone quiet on the angel front since that announcement 9 months earlier. No other Divine encounters, no more instructions or angelic visits. Was Mary really carrying the Messiah, the Saviour of the world? If so, why was everything going so un-Godlike?

Why, when they arrived at Bethlehem could they find no accommodation? Why had all their family connections been used up and why were all the hotels and motels full to overflowing. The only place left available for them was an animal shelter – a cave – and the only place for the Baby to lie in was an animal-feeding trough.

There would be none of the usual exuberant family celebrations – just the noise the animals made. Then suddenly they were surrounded by shepherds who came to see her 'Baby' and worship God. The shepherds said they had been told to come by hosts of angels who were praising God. Mary and Joseph hadn't heard the angels but they certainly saw the shepherds – maybe God hadn't forgotten them after all.

Later when they presented Jesus in the Temple, some people came up to them with prophecies about Jesus, and still later they received a visit from the Magi. Yes, God had told some other people about their 'secret', but what did it all mean? They had to live their ordinary lives and yet live with and for a unique and distinctly un-ordinary Child.

No sooner had the Magi finished worshipping Jesus than Mary, Joseph and Jesus had to hurriedly flee for their lives and escape from Israel as displaced refugees into Egypt. Otherwise Herod would have killed Jesus along with all the other boys 2 years old or younger.

Yes, God had provided the gold to supply all their needs in Egypt, but what did the incense and myrrh represent? Incense for worshipping God and myrrh for embalming a dead body? Hardly the 'usual' gifts for a newborn baby. Where were the rattle, clothes and cuddly toy? And if Jesus really was God's love letter and 'gift' to the world, how was it they didn't all recognise it and welcome Him?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2 continued: Mary – The Pondering Parent

How come Herod was so mad and they had to leave for fear of their lives? Was this just a foretaste of what was to come?

Yes, Mary had been obedient and miracles had taken place but she still couldn't understand it all. However, she learned to ponder and trust. She got on with her life and left the details to God. Yes, it was hard; yes, it was difficult to understand; and yes, it was so unusual it was scary - but through it all her trust in God never wavered and became stronger with every passing day. She learned obedience through suffering in silence.

Mary would say to us today...

The Christian life is not easy. There are many things we don't understand but God calls us to trust Him completely for today and the future. We only recognise His peace when we fully trust Him during the challenging times.

Prayer

Father, please help me to be more like Mary. To trust You at all times, especially when I can't hear Your voice or see Your hand at work. Help me to trust You for the future regardless of where You will lead me. Help me rejoice in the little things that reveal Your love, Your provision and protection, Your mercy and Your grace. Amen.

Additional readings

Luke 2:21-35; Luke 2:41-52; Mark 3:31-35; John 2:1-11.

Questions

What has God said to you that you are finding hard?

How can we learn to trust God more?

What stops us feeling the peace of God?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3: Mary – The Devoted Mother

Reading

John 19:1-37.

The Devoted Mother

When we consider Mary's life we have to admit a lot of it was very difficult. Yes, she was privileged to be the one through whom God would come to earth – she would be the Messiah-bearer, and as such a most blessed woman. However, from a purely human perspective, it was not plain sailing.

She was a virgin who was misunderstood as promiscuous. Her first-born was often treated as an orphan – since Joseph wasn't his father – in addition to being considered a baby conceived out of wedlock. She wasn't able to enjoy the usual home-birth surrounded by doting family and friends rejoicing in the first male-birth. On top of that, she had to give birth in a cave – a shelter for animals.

Then it seemed almost immediately she had to up and leave in order to prevent her Son being murdered by Herod the Great. Once Herod died they could return to Israel and settle down in Nazareth. However, shortly after the birth of their 6th child, Joseph died and Mary was left as a young widow with 7 small children.

Then at 30, Jesus, who had been a tower of strength and had assumed Joseph's roles, left to be an itinerant Rabbi. He performed many miracles and brought joy and healing wherever He went - yet there was a constant undercurrent of mistrust and hatred from the religious authorities. In the end they gained the upper hand and Jesus was sentenced to death upon a Cross.

Mary had watched Jesus' life from the manger to the Judgement Hall and on to Golgotha. Yes, she had loved Him, walked with Him, talked with Him, listened to Him, laughed and cried with Him. Now that time prophesied so long ago – not just in the Old Testament but through Simeon too – had reached its climax. The sword that pierced Jesus would also pierce her heart.

But she didn't turn away. She didn't run and hide. She would stand by her Jesus until the last breath had left His body. He was not only her 'Son'; He was her Lord and Saviour, and she would stay with Him until the end – knowing that the Scriptures had to be fulfilled.

As she stood watching, Jesus looked at her. He saw her and He saw John and motioned for them to move together and support each other through that terrible time. She 'lost' Jesus but gained John for those desperate moments between Calvary and the 'Empty' Tomb. The Messiah had to suffer – before He could re-enter His glory.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3 continued: Mary – The Devoted Mother

Mary would say to us today...

A life lived in intimate relationship with Jesus will have many bitter/sweet moments. Hold on to the promises God gives you and never give in to doubt. Circumstances do not change the power or certainty of the promises of God. And don't forget to be thankful for all the love, peace and joy He gives you along the way.

Prayer

Father, please help me to hold on when You seem distant. Help me to trust that Your Promises never fail and by faith to see past the circumstances to the fulfilment of the vision and destiny You have for me. Amen.

Additional readings

Psalm 23; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10; 2 Corinthians 11:16-30.

Questions

Why isn't the Christian life easy?

How do we learn to hold on when life is tough?

What is the dream or vision you are waiting for God to fulfil?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 4: Mary – The Spirit-filled Disciple

Reading

Acts 1:1-14; 2:1-4.

The Spirit-filled Disciple

Mary went for 'gold'. I guess in one way she would have had every right to sink into despair when Jesus died. She had been through so much already – it seemed like the last straw. Her emotional tank, which had been running on empty, was now exposed to the proverbial 'smell of an oily rag.' What kept her hanging on? What hope caused her to see past Calvary and Joseph of Arimathea's garden tomb?

Her trust in the Scriptures. The Scripture that promised that God's chosen One would not see decay. He had to rise from the dead. Once He had done that, the next phase had to kick into gear. Jesus promised to send "*Another Counsellor*", the Holy Spirit, who would come and remain with them after He ascended back to His Father.

Yes, the disciples were to wait in Jerusalem to receive the power from on high, from the Holy Spirit. The disciples stayed together as a group and had some house-keeping to do – to choose someone to replace Judas Iscariot as one of the leadership team of Apostles. So they waited and prayed – and chose Matthias.

But their wait wasn't over. They still had to wait for the Holy Spirit – but when He came... Wow, what a change! Peter, the timid man who had denied even knowing Jesus, became the leader-spokesman. He let the inquisitive multi-ethnic crowd realise that the disciples were far from being drunk with wine – they were filled with the Holy Spirit. And just as with a sponge drenched in water, having been baptised with the Holy Spirit, the disciples were letting the power of the Spirit ooze out over everywhere.

Just as the Holy Spirit had come on Mary at the conception of Jesus, so now He filled her again, but this time in a whole new way. Before this, the filling was at a specific time for a specific purpose – at Pentecost it was once and for always.

That awesome power had come into her body once more but this time to stay forever.

Yes, Mary had a privileged life. Yes, Mary was a one off and yes, Mary was allowed experiences we can only imagine or dream of. But let's not forget she was human. She was a girl who loved God and offered herself completely and utterly to God for Him to use in whatever way He chose.

God is still seeking men and women (and can I add young men and young women) who will be humble enough, who will be heaven-focused (instead of earth-focused) enough for Him to use.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 4 continued: Mary – The Spirit-filled Disciple

They are the ones who realise that they are nothing without God, and yet also know that nothing is impossible with God.

People who will stop long enough to consider their life purpose and ask God to write His agenda in the diary of their lives and erase all other appointments.

They are the people who in the power of the Holy Spirit will turn this world the right side up and usher in the Kingdom of God to earth - God's history-makers. Will you be one?

Mary would say to us today...

I'm so glad I waited with the other disciples for that wonderful day when we were all filled with the Holy Spirit. He made such an amazing difference to all our lives. We received a joy and power we never knew before and would never be without – it transformed our lives and society.

Prayer

Father, I long to be a history-maker for You. I commit my life to You again and ask You to fill me with your Holy Spirit and to use me for the extension of Your Kingdom on earth. Amen.

Additional readings

Joel 2:25-32; Acts 2:23-31; Acts 10:1-48.

Questions

Why are people afraid of the Holy Spirit?

What difference does the filling of the Holy Spirit make to your life?

In what ways do you want to be a history-maker this year?