

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

# **Mary of Magdala The woman whose life was totally transformed by the power of God**

### **Lesson 1: Mary of Magdala was set free from demon possession**

#### **Reading: Luke 8:1-3**

Magdala was a small town just along the road on the west coast of Lake Kinnereth, about 5kms to the north of Tiberias. Edersheim, in his book, "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah", tells us that at the time of Christ, Magdala was known for its shipbuilding, fishing, agriculture and fine woollen textures and dye works. It was a wealthy town, and so it is completely understandable that Mary would be able to support Jesus and his disciples financially.

Whilst the town was renowned for its moral corruption, we have no reason to believe that Mary was a prostitute or the girl to whom Dr Luke refers in the previous chapter. However, Mary had a problem. We are not told how Mary became demon-possessed; all we are told by both Dr Luke and Mark is that Jesus cast out seven demons from Mary.

We can only guess how traumatic Mary's life must have been before she was healed. Every incidence we read of in Scripture about demon possession is that it is a terrifying experience. Fear, hate, hopelessness and terror are constant threats, and many sufferers experience pain and self-inflicted agony. None is able to deliver themselves.

Mary must have had a horrendous and tortured life. She would have constantly lived in a state of deception and despair. Even though she might have been very rich, yet none of her wealth was able to provide any healing, peace, satisfaction or security. She must have longed for deliverance and could have often considered death a preferable alternative to her debilitating existence. She must have desperately sought a way out, a permanent solution to her distraught life.

Then somehow, somewhere, sometime she met Jesus. Jesus came to this earth to usher in the Kingdom of God. Whenever the Kingdom of God meets the kingdom of darkness a battle ensues. They are not equal and opposite forces wrestling for supremacy. The Kingdom of God is totally superior, just as the Creator God is superior to the created enemy, Satan.

It didn't matter whether Jesus was confronted by seven demons or a legion of them; in every case they were defeated. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6 that we don't wrestle against human beings but with evil spirits and powers. However, Jesus has defeated the evil spirit world by dying on the Cross. We are to stand in that victory.

I am always impressed by the way the Bible describes the times Jesus delivered people from demons. Jesus displayed no excessive behaviour; He just commanded the demons to depart. There was no wrestling, no question or doubt. All that happened is that Jesus released some of His authority and the victory was won.

What we read about Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus is that she was delivered of seven

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demons. No blow by blow account. Why? Because there wasn't one. Jesus commanded them to leave and they left.

Mary was set free. What an amazing miracle. She was totally incapable of setting herself free. So far as she was aware, she was condemned to be bound for the rest of her life on earth. Then Jesus came and she was totally transformed. Her fear was gone; she received hope and a peace she had never experienced before.

In response, she offered to financially support Jesus and His disciples. I don't believe she did so out of a sense of duty or to repay Jesus for what He had done for her. No, it wasn't to buy her salvation, to regain her self-respect nor to buy her future. I believe it flowed from a grateful heart. She never forgot what it meant to be set free, and she dedicated her life to become a follower, a supporter and a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Her dedication matured over the years and she followed Jesus even to the extent of being present at His crucifixion.

### **Mary Magdalene would say to us today...**

Are you grateful for all Jesus has done for you? If you are set free as I was, you will want to serve Jesus Christ with all you have got for the rest of your life on earth, and financially support the work of extending His Kingdom.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me remember that Your power to heal and deliver those who are sick, possessed or oppressed by the enemy is the same today as it has ever been. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Luke 4:31-37
- Ephesians 2:1-10
- Romans 12:1-13.

### **Questions**

1. Why do we struggle with the idea that Jesus can set people free from demons today?
2. Why did Mary financially support Jesus and His disciples?
3. How do you show your love for Jesus with your finances?

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### **Lesson 2: Followed Jesus right up to His crucifixion and burial**

#### **Reading: Matthew 27:45-61**

Dr Luke recorded that on one occasion Jesus healed ten lepers and yet only one returned to give Him thanks. Jesus was particularly disappointed that the only one who showed any gratitude was a foreigner.

How easy it is to fall into the trap of taking everything for granted. We do the same. How many bother about saying thank you to God for food, for meals, let alone for health and strength, for homes and employment. What about the very breath we breathe? When was the last time you thanked the Lord for that? And yet without it, we would be dead.

It is a sad reflection of our age that there is so much debate about how much people should contribute to the work of the Church. For so many, it seems, 10% verges on extortion and so the Church, at large, generally has to try and sustain itself on the proverbial 'smell of an oily rag'. I'm quite sure that if Mary of Magdala were here today she would be heart-broken and astounded.

I sometimes wonder if Paul had a picture of Mary in his mind when he wrote to the Christians at Corinth, commending to them the grace of giving and encouraging them to give as generously as the Macedonian church had done. Paul remarked, "*They did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.*" (2 Corinthians 5: 5.)

That is exactly what Mary of Magdala had done. Jesus had set her free from demon possession and as a response to the love she had received, she devoted some of her finances to help support the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. Please note it was not expected of her. It was not in payment for what Jesus had done. We can never repay the price Jesus has paid to set us free – that is incalculable.

No, her generous response flowed as a natural response from giving herself to Christ. It's a matter of the heart, not the wallet. We need to remember that Jesus gives us everything we have, including the ability to earn and receive wealth. He makes no demands on our money – He just demands our lives.

God entrusts our finances, talents and gifts to us. We don't make them or own them, they are freely bestowed upon us by God and He holds us accountable for 100%. The amount we offer Him is entirely up to us. However, I am always challenged when I listen to Keith Green's rendition of the song, "*What if I give all?*"

The boy gave his lunch and Jesus made it satisfy the hunger of over 5000 people. It had an incredible impact. Jesus gave His life and it changed the world.

Mary of Magdala gave herself first to the Lord and then the generosity flowed. How do we know that? Because she not only gave her finances but she also gave her life and followed Jesus.

You see, if you just give money out of obligation, duty or with a grudging attitude, sooner or later you will want to reduce your giving or start complaining about how it is spent. If you give yourself to the Lord first, the gift, having been given, is not yours to worry about, since you have already given it to the Lord to whom you have already entrusted your life.

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For Mary, her generosity was a by-product of following Jesus. Her vision was not to give but to follow. She followed Jesus through Galilee, she followed Jesus through Samaria, she followed Jesus through Judea, and she followed Jesus through Jerusalem. Mary saw the throngs of people who came for the miracles of healing, she witnessed the struggling faith of the disciples, she witnessed the antagonism and hostility of the religious leaders and yet she kept following and supporting Jesus.

Yes, she followed Jesus that dreadful day. Did she walk the Via Dolorosa? Did she see Jesus at the Praetorium? Was she present when Pilate made that fateful pronouncement and washed his hands but handed Jesus over to be crucified? She was definitely there when they crucified Jesus between two thieves. Yes, she witnessed first hand the agony Jesus experienced upon the cross. She heard Him cry, *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* How would she have felt? How would you have felt had you been there? Knowing all the time that He was there in your place?

Mary witnessed Jesus' agony and death. She would have seen His dead body removed from the cross. She would have followed at a respectful distance and witnessed Jesus' body laid in the brand new, rock-hewn tomb in Joseph of Arimathea's garden. She saw the huge stone rolled in front as the final act of closure of Jesus' existence on earth. And she returned home to grieve and contemplate the most inhumane act of history.

### **Mary Magdalene would say to us today...**

I could never understand why anyone would deny, betray or crucify Jesus. All I could do was to be there with Him and for Him until the end.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me mature in my Christian walk so that I follow Jesus regardless of the inconvenience, the challenges, the financial as well as the emotional cost. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- John 19:16-27
- Mark 15:37-47
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

### **Questions**

1. Why do we expect life to be easy?
2. What challenges have you had to endure for Jesus so far?
3. How do you feel Mary Magdalene felt when the stone was rolled in front of the tomb in which Jesus' body had been laid?

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### **Lesson 3: Mary was the first person Jesus revealed Himself to after His resurrection**

#### **Reading: John 20:1-18**

Oh, how much Jesus must have loved Mary of Magdala! From the moment they first met until the moment of His death. Yes, He first met her as a desperate and haunted woman. Possessed by no less than seven demons we are told. What a pitiful sight she must have been. However, Jesus had overwhelming compassion on her and commanded the demons to depart, thus setting her completely free.

Though undoubtedly exhausted, one can almost envision the wrinkles disappearing from her face, revealing that beautiful innocence, and peace flushing out all the pain and distress. The haggard old woman gradually released into a beautiful mature lady. No longer would she dread a dawn or long for death, she could face the future with joy and hope – Jesus had set her free.

Mary of Magdala, however, was slightly different from most of the people Jesus healed. Mary chose to follow Jesus from that moment on. No, not as a distant observer, but as a devoted disciple. Yes, I realise that we often limit the term, “disciple” to the well known and named 12, however, the Scriptures reveal that there were other disciples, among whom were some women, and of which Mary was one.

Mary, not only decided to commit her life to following Jesus but she also committed some of her income. We are not told how much. What we are told is that she, along with others, supported Jesus and His disciples. I love how Matthew describes them: *“They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for His needs.”* (Matthew 27: 55.)

Yes, Mary gave her life in response to what Jesus had done for her and that included her wealth. However, the cost she would bear was greater than finance. The cost would be in devotion, adoration, love and worship.

Mary followed Jesus and, undoubtedly, experienced the final seven days of Jesus’ life on earth. She would have sensed the growing tension in the crowds, the increasing antagonism and hatred of the religious leaders and the quiet determination of Jesus to go all the way to the cross, regardless of the extreme spiritual agony, emotional drain and physical suffering He would have had to endure.

I’m quite sure all her feminine instincts were straining to try and shield Jesus from the onslaught. She would have longed to be able to take Jesus away and to cause all the confrontation to cease. But she was impotent to do anything significant.

All she could do was to be there in the background for Him. She determined that she would not leave Him in His deepest hours of need. Regardless of the cost to her, financially, physically or emotionally, she would not desert her Lord. Yes, she followed Jesus to the cross and remained watching until He breathed His last breath. She even contrived to observe where Joseph of Arimathea laid His body in the garden tomb. Then she went home.

Mary was determined that Jesus’ body be treated with the utmost respect and properly embalmed. So, on the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Salome walked together to Joseph of Arimathea’s garden. As they walked along they discussed what they might have to do in order to remove the huge stone guarding the entrance to the tomb.

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When a tomb was carved in the rock face, as was the case here, a trench was dug, so that a circular stone, over two metres in diameter, could be rolled in front to keep people out. The tomb entrance would be at the base of a hill so the stone would remain in place by the force of gravity. To remove it would require the help of about three or more strong men.

As we read, when the women arrived, the stone was gone and so was the body. Matthew records that an angel told the women of Jesus' resurrection and so they departed the garden. John, however, records one of the most poignant and precious divine encounters ever. Peter and John, having run to see the vacant tomb for themselves, left Mary to grieve and ponder alone.

She was no doubt completely distraught. Her friend and Saviour had not only been cruelly crucified but now His tomb appeared to have been desecrated as well. Then through the mist of doubts and despair she saw the gardener. Maybe he would know where Jesus' body had been transferred.

It only took one word! Jesus only had to use her name, Mary! Wow, what a moment! What a privilege! Mary of Magdala became the very first person to see the resurrected Christ in all His glory. Yes, Mary of Magdala had been set free from seven demons, however, this was something totally new and of eternal and earth-shattering significance.

The grave had finally been beaten; death had been denied its power and the fear and doubts of the future dissolved into peace, joy and guaranteed assurance and hope. Why did Jesus choose Mary? I don't know. All I know is He is a gracious God and He loved Mary. However, the message is exactly the same for you and me. Hear Jesus call your name right now and also experience the same mercy, grace, forgiveness, peace, joy and hope, because Jesus loves you, just as He did Mary.

### **Mary Magdalene would say to us today...**

I shall never ever forget that morning. Oh to see Jesus in His resurrection glory was the most amazing thing I ever experienced. I so wish you had been there – you would never be the same again. You would never ever doubt that He is God!

### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me to remember that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and lives today. Please keep me focused upon His return rather than what happens to me on earth. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Matthew 28:1-10
- Luke 24:1-12
- Mark 16:1-11

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think Jesus chose to meet Mary before anyone else after His resurrection?
2. How do you think Mary felt when she realised Jesus was alive from the dead?
3. What difference is the fact that Jesus is alive from the dead going to make to your life this week?