

THE MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE BIBLE SPEAK

6. How did Solomon ultimately become king? What was Bathsheba's role? What do we know about the kind of man she had raised in Solomon? (1 Kings 3:7-14) Contrast Bathsheba's role as a mother with Rebekah's. What can we glean about their mothering in light of how their sons turned out?



MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS

(Luke 1, Luke 2:22-35, Matthew 2:13-18,
Luke 2:41-52, John 2:1-11, John 19:22-27, Acts 1:12-14)

When we think of biblical motherhood, we often think of Mary first. From the beginning, she is offered to us as an example of deep faith and trust in a situation that was unlike any other. Profoundly humbled by her assignment as the earthly vessel for the Savior, she rejoiced in her calling—even though she had to know many would never understand or believe the story. Mary's joy as a mother must have been immense: the elation of receiving the angel Gabriel's message that she was chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, the pride she must have felt in watching her divine son grow up and begin His ministry, the euphoria she experienced at His Resurrection. But hers was a story also marked by deep grief and sacrifice.

We most often focus on Mary around Christmastime each year, as the radiant young mother overwhelmed by the miracle happening in her own body. We contemplate the tenderness and wonder with which she must have held her newborn son, God in the flesh. When we happen upon a Christmas crèche or nativity scene, we consider the peace and joy that seem to radiate from her sweet face, as everything is bathed in a golden Christmas glow. But this

is just the beginning of Mary's life as a mother. Along the way she would experience grief only a mother who has lost a child can understand, and before that ever happened, she would watch as her son was mocked, falsely accused, and rejected by the very people He was trying to save. As great as Mary's joy was at her son's birth, her sorrow later in His life was just as intense.

Motherhood is like that too, sometimes—a confusing mix of emotions. There can be celebration, anxiety, exhaustion, bliss, and depression. Mothers can worry about their children, be perplexed by them, and be blessed by them—all in the same day! As children grow into their own independence, mothers can wonder what happened to the closeness they once shared. There are times when motherhood itself may feel like more of a burden than a joy—the endless (and frequently thankless) work of it, the exhaustion, the laundry and the cooking and the countless questions, the micromanagement of running a household with small (and bigger!) children in it. Our faith doesn't require mothers to pretend that they don't feel overwhelmed at times. Motherhood will always be a mix of the highest highs and lowest lows, a reflection of our broader life in this fallen world. There is no Easter without Calvary, and every mother's journey will be marked by both delight and despair. So let us walk along on Mary's path, discovering ways to navigate both.

SIMEON'S PROPHECY

At the end of the nativity narrative in the Gospel of Luke, we see Mary and Joseph arriving at the temple in Jerusalem to present their son to the Lord forty days after His birth, according to the customs of Jewish law. A sacrifice was offered, prayers were made, and the whole experience must have been a beau-

tiful and exciting one for the parents. Mary must have been so proud, walking into those hallowed temple precincts holding her infant son close, knowing in her heart of hearts that she was cradling in her arms the temple's Lord. Mary and Joseph also experienced the joy of seeing other people—the holy Simeon and the righteous Anna—who recognized their son for who He was.

Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms and prayed these famous words, thanking God for allowing him to live to see the day of the Messiah's arrival:

Sovereign LORD, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)

This poetic Song of Simeon (known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, from the opening lines in Latin, "Now let depart") became a central part of evening prayers for ancient and medieval Christians, when they would pray that God would "dismiss" them into the rest of sleep. This song is a glorious acknowledgment of the fullness of God's revelation in Christ, and it must have made Mary's heart swell with joy to hear her precious baby recognized as the salvation not just of Israel but of "all nations" (Luke 2:31).

But Simeon wasn't finished with his prophecy just yet. He had more to say, specifically to Mary:

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary,

his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:33-35)

These mysterious words would have been harder to hear and understand than Simeon's previous promises of light and peace. In this prophecy, Jesus would cause not just the rise but also the fall of many. Simeon went on to call the baby "a sign that will be spoken against" (Luke 2:34). The road for Mary's little boy would not be an easy one, and Simeon was the first one to give this young mother that difficult news: an announcement of a different sort. People would speak out against Jesus, they would argue about Him, and they would say things about Him that would reveal their own darkest thoughts. And as if all that were not enough, Simeon told Mary that the pain that lay ahead was not just for Jesus but also for her. "A sword will pierce your own soul too," he said to her (Luke 2:35). That's not exactly the sort of thing you want written on a baby shower cake!

The hard fact is, Simeon was telling the truth not just about the painful events that were on the horizon for Mary's life but also about Christian discipleship. If you remember the day and the hour in which you surrendered your life to Christ as His own forever, you recall it as one of incredible joy and freedom. And it was! But it was also something more: that day was your first step on a challenging road. All of us who follow Christ must walk His path, and He made clear it wouldn't be all mountaintops.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)

The Christian walk requires commitment and humility, and the words of Simeon are important for us all to ponder, not just Mary. Did she ever want to turn back? Did she want to say to God, "Never mind, it's too hard. The angel didn't tell me about this part"?

We never see Mary trying to back out of her divine assignment. Not once in her conversation with Gabriel had she said, "Wait, tell me what's going to happen to me." She simply asked the angel *how* it was going to happen, and then she said, "I am the LORD's servant" (Luke 1:38). However, this doesn't mean that she knew immediately just how difficult Jesus's path would be. Mary's famous Magnificat prayer in Luke 1:46-55 ended on a note of praise, thanking God for remembering Israel. Here in the temple, forty days after Jesus's birth, may have marked the first time it truly occurred to Mary that the ending of her son's story might not be the one for which she had been hoping and praying.

MARY THE REFUGEE

Mothers want only the best for their children. So much of the time leading up to their arrival is about nesting. Family and friends usually come together to help provide the basics you need to create a safe environment that's warm and welcoming. Everyone wants a nursery space for their little one, with a sturdy crib and soft sheets and blankets—maybe some wall art or match-

ing curtains. There is great delight in crafting a beautiful physical place for that baby to begin growing and in dreaming of all the firsts to come. The last thing any mother wants is to have to snatch up her baby and run for her life, but that is exactly what Mary had to do.

A dire warning and clear directive came straight from heaven right after the Magi left. Though these wise men from the East had previously promised to tell King Herod the whereabouts of the new Messiah, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Instead, they traveled home via a different route. Meanwhile, an angel appeared to Joseph and instructed him to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's evil plan.

When they had gone, an angel of the LORD appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the LORD had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." (Matthew 2:13-15)

In essence, Joseph was living out parallels to his namesake—a chosen man who was gifted with the ability to understand important dreams—and one whose journey to save the nation of Israel led him through Egypt. I wonder if Jesus's devout human parents took note of the similarities.

They were faithful to God's guidance, and Herod was not happy about it.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more." (Matthew 2:16-18)

Herod's murderous rage would not stop until he believed Jesus had been wiped off the face of the earth. Joseph and Mary had no choice but to run as far away as possible, somewhere Herod would have no authority to hurt them even if he was able to track them down. They ran to the Roman province of Egypt. Unlike Judea, which had kept its system of native kingship in place alongside the Roman administration, Egypt was under the direct rule of the Roman emperor himself. Herod would have found it much harder to persuade Roman officials there to do his bidding. There was no one he could order around in Egypt. Besides, in the bustling metropolises of Egypt and among the thriving Jewish communities there, an obscure couple and their child would be nearly impossible to find. They were safe there, but at what cost?

The journey would have been long and exhausting. The young family, probably leaving their native land for the first time, set out across the rugged plains of Sinai carrying a toddler, trudging

ing through thirst and weariness across an expanse of sand and rugged hills. Finally, they emerged in the greenery of the Nile delta, glowing in contrast to the surrounding sands. The Sphinx, then with face undamaged, would have been an astounding sight. The battered trio likely gazed in awe at the already ancient Pyramids, including the Great Pyramid, one of what we know now as the Seven Wonders of the World. It must have been overwhelming.

These grand new sights unfolded at the end of a journey sparked by that harrowing moment when Joseph awoke and knew they had to flee. By the way, the Scripture tells us that Joseph didn't hesitate, but "took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt" (Matthew 2:14). Notice that they left "during the night." For Mary, it must have been hectic and terrifying, to be roused—not to tend to her frightened or hungry child—but by her husband, speaking insistently about a dream he was given by God. Mary was a woman who'd heard from God before, and in her faith, there was no hesitation to get moving. Mary and Joseph slipped out of Bethlehem in the darkness, Mary holding Jesus close. Was this mother praying her precious son would stay quiet as they tried to put as many miles as possible between themselves and Herod's assassins?

But in addition to being afraid, Mary may also have been tempted to despair. After all, this probably wasn't how she thought her story was going to go! Her son was supposed to be the Messiah who would save His people, the great glory of Israel. And now they were fleeing in the night, running away from the land of Israel—forever, it could be. They would have had no idea when (or even if) they would ever be able to return. Without much chance to say good-bye to family and friends, without

more than a few hastily gathered belongings, they were leaving their old life behind and setting out for a new one. Simeon's prophecy seemed to be coming true, long before she had even thought it might.

Was Mary doubting herself as a mother, the earthly mother of the Son of God? The Lord of the whole universe had entrusted her with His only Son, and she wasn't able to provide Him a permanent place to call home. The young Messiah was less than two years old, and He was already on the run. The kind of life that she probably expected to give Him—that she had wanted so desperately to provide for Him—seemed to be an impossibility now.

Any mother who has ever faced financial difficulty knows something of the pain Mary, a homeless refugee, felt on that journey to Egypt. It's easier to do without for ourselves, but it's a much more painful scenario when it comes to our children. I have no doubt my mother struggled financially during the years it was just the two of us. I remember our clunker of a car regularly breaking down and lots of baloney and ketchup sandwiches, but we had each other and plenty of laughter too. My mom was an expert at shielding me from the realities of our situation, and my grandparents were always present to help and care for us when we needed it most. I look back now and wonder how a single mother in her mid-twenties managed to work nonstop, sew our clothes, and make me believe my childhood was magical! My mother-in-law, Jouetta, together with her husband, raised six kids on a tight budget and did the same thing. In both my and my husband's family, our mothers modeled faith, perseverance, and grit. Mary would have needed those in abundant supply.

Mothers have real anxieties about their children's futures when it comes to things like choosing a college or enlisting in the

military. Will they choose friends whose influence will be positive, or will they get tangled up with people who draw them into addiction or danger? Who will they marry, and when can we expect grandkids? But let's take that one step further. What about mothers who truly don't know where their next meal is coming from? What about the mother who flees the chaos of a collapsing country or the poverty or violence that threatens her child's life? She is journeying on a path that Mary and Jesus knew.

We walk the path of Mary too when our plans for our children turn out very differently from what we had imagined. Just as Mary held Christ close on that perilous journey to Egypt, we too must cling to Christ through our most daunting seasons. Because we know the end of Mary's story, it's easy for us to see that what may have felt like failure, fear, and despair to Mary was just the beginning of a far larger and more glorious adventure. When you see your children suffering, it's often hard to take the long view of your own story. Scripture reminds us, however, that God is ever present. He is as interested in the details of your struggle as He was in the plight of Mary and Joseph all those centuries ago. That family on the run finally arrived to witness the pomp and glory of Egypt. Yet, for all the glitz and glamor of those human achievements, Mary knew that the child she was carrying in her arms was a greater wonder than all of them.

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

After Herod's death, an angel of the Lord once again appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him it was safe to return to Israel. This time, Jesus and His parents hiked all the way north to Nazareth, which became His home. Luke closes his early narrative with an interesting story, one in which Jesus speaks for the first time:

Every year Jesus's parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. (Luke 2:41-47)

This story is often used to highlight the beginnings of Christ's mission on earth. We see someone wise beyond His years, unafraid to be alone and on His own in a big city, fully engaged with the religious teachers at the temple. If you've heard the story, *especially* if you've heard it many times, that may be where you initially focus. But let's not forget—at the heart of this passage—there was a frantic mother whose son had been missing for days!

When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." (Luke 2:48)

Mary must have been enormously relieved to lay eyes on her son, knowing he was safe and unharmed. Yes, she knew He had a divine destiny, but it seems she hadn't anticipated He would be

so young when it started to reveal itself. She was clearly taken aback, *How could you let us fear and panic like this?*

In the previous two passages we looked at in this chapter—the prophecy of Simeon, and the flight into Egypt—Mary suffered as a mother because of outside forces. She experienced foreboding at the words of Simeon, and she experienced fear at the prospect of Herod's assassins. But in this grief, it was Jesus Himself who was the source of her pain. Can you imagine what those three days must have been like for Mary? Even one hour of not knowing where your children are and being unable to protect them, where they might be lost and confused and crying out for you, is agony. It is a grief that hundreds of thousands of mothers experience every year. Hundreds of thousands of children in the United States go missing every year, leaving mothers worried and desperate, swinging between hope and despair until that child is located. For a few unbearable days, Mary was one of those mothers. But she lived in a world where mothers had no access to call up 9-1-1 and rally police to help in the search. She lived in a time without cell phones, no social media where she could post her son's picture, lacking a way to quickly stay in contact with any leads from friends and family who also must have been searching.

In the midst of this story, it is easy to miss a telling detail—the number of days: “after three days they found him in the temple courts” (Luke 2:46). Jesus was missing from his distraught parents for three days, just as He would later be absent from His grieving followers for three long days. On the third day, Mary had a foreshadowing of the joy of the Resurrection to come when she finally caught sight of her son. And He was whole, well, and alive! As much as she must have been grateful for what seemed

like a miracle, Mary asked the same question any mother in that situation would have asked: “Why have you treated us like this?” Jesus responded:

“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he was saying to them. (Luke 2:49–50)

Was Jesus’s reply a cold splash of water to Mary’s face? *Why were you even looking for me?* Mama of the Savior of the world or not, I’m guessing that hit Mary right in the heart. Interestingly, Jesus did not really answer the question. (Admittedly, many of us can relate to a twelve-year-old evading a direct question!) Jesus acted instead as if it was the most natural thing in the world for Him to be exactly where He was, in the temple. Some translations say that Jesus asked His parents, “Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49 NKJV), as if their worry made no sense. Mary and Joseph knew their oldest son was unmistakably divine, the Son of God, but had they lost sight of His heavenly mission in the midst of raising and family and the busyness of life? Jesus’s response must have seemed infuriatingly unsympathetic to His confused parents. The Bible tells us they didn’t understand it.

In this passage in Luke 2 we see Mary echoing the feelings of her ancestors who also found themselves bewildered by God’s mysterious plans at times. Rebekah, Rachel, Jochebed—these women must have felt like God’s plans went off the rails when their sons were thrown into exile. In fact, these unexpected twists were key parts of God’s final plan. While Mary had a warning in the form of Simeon’s prophecy about Jesus’s chaotic fu-

ture, she still couldn't fully see the ultimate shape of God's plan. Jesus's disappearance must have first frightened her, and then it probably confused her as she found Him safe and unaware of the panic His absence had caused. It must have been puzzling at times to consider His divine nature as He grew from child to adolescent to adult. Scripture tells us their family returned to normal—though it was certainly a *new* normal—after this unsettling incident in Jerusalem.

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:51-52)

This story in Luke is the first, last, and only glimpse we have of Jesus's childhood. After this, all the Gospel narratives transition quickly to Jesus as an adult. The story of Mary's suffering is more familiar to us from this point on. We can more easily imagine the grief she must have known as the mother of a falsely-accused, executed man. For mothers who suffer as they watch their grown children struggle to find their way and choose things that we know will bring them pain, Mary has walked your path too. The mother of Jesus lived all those things. Jesus was on a mission to sacrifice in a way that certainly caused those closest to him enormous grief, but with the larger goal of providing a means of salvation for every single one of us. Mary was blessed among women, but was also asked as a mother to continually surrender her son and to watch as He was misunderstood and abused. What grace and maturity she modeled for us as she "treasured" all those realities in her human heart.

MARY AT CANA

The Gospel of John gives us our only glimpse of an interaction between the adult Jesus and His mother that is not connected to the final days of His life. At a wedding in Cana, Mary urged Jesus to begin His public ministry. Some scholars believe Mary may have been connected to the wedding party through family ties or friendship, which is why she felt some level of responsibility for the enjoyment of the guests at the reception. Assuming Mary had truly come to terms with the fact that Jesus's road ahead would be a challenging one, it would have taken true selflessness to tell her son, "This is the time. Don't wait any longer." But it's also not clear whether Mary, lovingly and totally confident in her divine firstborn, knew what she was asking when she brought this minor domestic problem to His attention.

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." (John 2:1-5)

On the surface of it, what an odd place to begin a ministry of miracles and preaching! Our earthly minds may think a Sabbath morning in the local synagogue would have been more appropriate. Maybe Jesus's first miracle should have been a truly dramatic event: an exorcism, a raising from the dead, a healing

that no one could have expected. But that wasn't what happened. Jesus's first miracle was performed at a small wedding celebration among family and friends. The ministry that would take Him to the cross began in joy, in the midst of human rejoicing—a wedding that was perhaps a foreshadowing of the wedding of Christ to the church, still to come. And in the middle of all that celebrating, there was an embarrassing reminder of the hosts' limitations: no more wine.

Notice that Mary did not go to Jesus and say, "What do You think about this?" or, "Maybe You should think about helping them out." All she did was present Him with the information and leave Him to make His own choice. Jesus spoke colloquially and informally to His mother, in words that are difficult to translate into English. What He literally said is, "What to me and to you, woman? Not yet has come the hour of me." My initial reading of this story years ago was that Jesus sounded rather brusque. However, digging into the original language helps us to see that wasn't the case at all. Simply addressing Mary as "woman" may sound a bit disrespectful or abrupt in English, but let's look at the Greek. In the original language, it is a polite and respectful term—something like "ma'am" or "dear lady" in English. It was formal, but firm; Jesus let Mary know He alone would respond as He deemed appropriate.

John the Baptist says of Jesus later in the Gospel of John, "He must become greater, and I must become less" (John 3:30). Every mother knows this moment, of learning when to step back and let your child take the lead. It will happen again and again as a child becomes an adult, spreading his or her wings of independence. Mary serves as our example here, deferring to God's ultimate purposes and plans. At that wedding, Jesus did begin

revealing His divine nature, setting into motion more than His own mother could ever have imagined would come.

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:6-11)

Notice that last line. Mary already knew what it appears the disciples discovered and embraced in a real way that day: Jesus's truly divine nature. These men had been following Jesus, listening to His teachings without yet having seen a miracle. Now they had, and the journey was underway.

MARY, MOTHER OF GRIEF

We cannot forget that, though Jesus was Mary's oldest, He was not her only child. We know of at least the named siblings James,

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Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Jude)—and unnamed sisters too (Matthew 6:3, 13:55–56; Mark 6:3). Mary had undoubtedly been busy raising her growing family while also remembering the promises and prophecies regarding her firstborn son. Despite the many responsibilities she must have had, in Jesus's final days Mary was not far away. Was she there as the crowds jubilantly cheered Jesus on His entry into Jerusalem?

And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9)

And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9–10)

As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19:37–38)

The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD, even the King of Israel!" (John 12:12–13)

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS

Imagine being a witness to this kind of rapturous reception and praise for your own son. From long before He was born into human form, Mary knew exactly who Jesus was, "the Son of the Most High." She had heard the prophecy that He would sit on the throne of His "father David. . . his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32–33). She had also seen the criticism and attacks of those who did not believe. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, I wonder if there was some part of Mary that thought, *Now they get it. They finally see and accept Jesus as their Messiah and Savior.* Or were the words of Simeon—promising not just salvation but also suffering—still tucked into her memory bank, a warning of what was still to come?

Mary was likely a witness to everything that happened to Jesus that week. Since she is mentioned at the cross, Mary likely would have been with the disciples in Jerusalem, traveling with them to support and help however she could. Because of the quick, sham trial of Jesus and the almost immediate crucifixion, Mary would not have had time to travel the many miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem on such short notice. We can assume that Mary was part of the inner circle who traveled with Jesus in his last months and weeks—and probably from before then.

During that time of traveling with Jesus, did Mary ever think that the road might end on a Roman cross? As a woman who grew up in occupied Roman territory, she may have. Crucifixion would not have been a new sight to her. The brutality of the Roman state was a part of her everyday life. That her own people's religious authorities would collude with the Roman state to bring about Jesus's execution—that was a plot twist she would not have foreseen. But she would have seen the anger of the men who argued with Him—the ones He consistently silenced with His

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knowledge and truth. She had likely heard the threats against Jesus.

How quickly the cheering crowds of Jerusalem morphed into holding a phony trial, which led to torture and a death sentence for Mary's beloved son. The mother of Jesus had to endure the sight of her son leaving those courts bloodied, beaten, and broken. She had to witness His nearly impossible struggle up to the place of His own execution. She had to stand by as her son's flesh and muscles were run through with iron nails. What she may not have anticipated was that Jesus would make no effort to save Himself. She might have thought what His disciples (including Judas) surely thought—that if push came to shove, and Jesus was dragged into a court, Roman or otherwise, He would use His formidable power to free Himself and prove that He was the Messiah.

Jesus's closest disciples had witnessed who He truly was in the weeks preceding His arrest, when He was transfigured before Peter, James, and John and clothed in all His heavenly glory (Matthew 17:1-9). Certainly that power and glory were well known by His mother. Did she also think that Jesus would use His power to extricate Himself if things ever went too far? Perhaps He at least would use His sharp tongue and sharper mind, the mind that had been confounding doctors of the law since He was twelve, to defend Himself.

The last moment we see Mary in the Gospels is at the foot of the cross. In one of the most heartrending scenes in all of Scripture, Jesus in His dying agony shows concern for His mother and what would happen to her after His death.

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS

When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25-27)

Here at the end of her son's life, Mary shows us how to walk the hardest path of all for any: the way of helplessness.

There is no harder thing than to be powerless in the face of a child's suffering. Any mother sitting up at night with a feverish, miserable child knows this pain. Any mother at a hospital bedside watching a beloved child fight for life knows this agony. *What can I do?* we plead with God in our prayers, and sometimes the answer is: *nothing*. What do we do when the path our child is on is no longer one that we can rescue them from? Where do we find the strength to face our own despair?

Mary found hers at the foot of the cross, which is where we find our strength too. Too often in our churches we are uncomfortable with suffering. We might talk about it, but we don't often like to *see* it. Some people wrongly believe that being a committed Christian means being and feeling happy and optimistic all the time. But Christ Himself warned us that's not reality:

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

Christ on the cross calls us to a life of suffering: the daily reality we experience as Christians. But He also reminds us to remember how the story ends. The empty tomb is still the source

of our unshakable joy. Mary shows us that the path to ultimate redemption and peace is *through* grief, right through the heart of it and out the other side. We can't avoid the cross on our way to the Resurrection.

The same is true of the path of discipleship that goes through motherhood. For those of you who are mothers, it isn't a question of *whether* you will walk through suffering in your motherhood; it's a question of *when*. Mary's sheer elation when she heard Jesus had risen from the dead is beyond our ability to imagine—or maybe not. Every mother who has embraced a child she thought she'd lost forever, when against all odds she holds that child in her arms again, has known what Mary felt that Easter morning. Mary's joy (and ours) does not happen in spite of the cross; it happens *because* of the cross.

MARY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Mary's last appearance in the Bible is not in the Gospels but in the book of Acts. Her story does not end with Easter—but like the story of the young Christian community, her story begins anew right there.

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:12-14)

After Jesus ascended into heaven, His disciples stayed put in Jerusalem as He had commanded them—directing them to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). Once Jesus was physically gone from them, they held all the tighter to their tiny community of believers. And that is where we find Mary, faithfully present and gathered in fellowship with Jesus's disciples. Even after her son (in His physical form) was gone from this earth, Mary devoted herself to her son's community. By joining with them, she continued His work after His ascension. She believed in the mission Jesus had given the early church, even when it was simply a handful of people in a rented room.

This would not have been a challenge for Mary, for she had been a believer in Christ longer than any of them. For Mary, to be among excited and nervous new converts must have felt like the fruition of the hopes and dreams she had held in her heart for so long. How far she had come! Jesus's mother had believed Him for thirty-three years, from the moment an angel told her that her entire life would be thrown into chaos by a miracle child. She'd trusted in His promises as she and Joseph stumbled blearily out of bed one night in Bethlehem and fled Herod's soldiers. She'd believed in Him as she sat holding Him close in a mighty land of foreign gods and great palaces. She'd believed as He'd grown up, a confident and unpredictable boy whose expectations were shaped by a kingdom she could not yet see. Knowing Jesus had triumphed over death and seeing the beginnings of His church sprouting up . . . in this Mary was witnessing the fulfillment of promises that the angel Gabriel and the priest Simeon had given her decades before. Finally, she could see in plain sight the once-hidden plans of God that had felt so mysterious.

Presumably, Mary shared these early stories with the fledgling

THE MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE BIBLE SPEAK

church and the men who would later record them in the Gospels. Mary gave them courage by sharing her own journey. She knew the path ahead would be a hard one, as the disciples struggled to make disciples of their own. They were embarking on a mission to spread the good news of God in Christ to every corner of their world. But this too is often at the heart of motherhood—the investment of slow and steady work, knowing you may not see the end results. Mary would not live to see the church become everything that it would eventually be in the centuries ahead. She probably died before Christianity had taken much root in her homeland.

Mothers devote themselves to a future that will outlive them, and they do so in the footsteps of Mary, who also worked for a promised expectation. They pray over their pregnant bellies, ask God for help through endless sleepless nights, and hope for a time when their children will embrace all the Lord has planned for their destinies. As a daughter, I'm grateful for both my earthly mother, who did all of these things and more, and the spiritual mothers I've been blessed with throughout my life. Some of them have children of their own; others do not. That never stopped them from generously pouring their time and wisdom into me when I so desperately needed it. And now I've come full circle, answering the questions of young women who are in the generation behind me. Careers, relationships, finances, dreams—these issues and more have been the subject of teary phone calls and frantic texts. I am forever grateful for the “mothers” who answered my cries for help and for the opportunities to do that now for the “daughters” God has brought into my life.

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS

Lord God, grant us the steadfastness of Mary in the face of both extraordinary joy and overwhelming sorrow. Help us to pick up our cross and follow You, right through the heart of grief and into the promise of redemption. Teach us to embrace our own helplessness when we see our children suffer, and give us the strength to surrender them to You just as Mary committed her beloved son to You. Remind us that we can all be mothers to those seeking guidance and help through life's challenges. Guide us to be faithful as Mary was, investing our lives in Your church and the gospel mission.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus Study Questions

1. How does Mary model the broad range of emotions and experiences mothers go through? From the beginning, she shows commitment to obedience and trust. (Luke 1:38) How can we develop the same spiritual characteristics in our lives?
2. What was Mary's reaction to Simeon's prophecy about Jesus's life? How would you react to news like this? (Luke 2:28-33)
3. Does Mary and Joseph's journey as refugees impact how you see those in need around the world? How can we draw inspiration from their willingness to follow God's direction, even when it required a perilous trek?
4. Even though they knew Jesus was the Son of God, Mary and Joseph had other children and a busy, ordinary life. Do you think it was easy at times to forget what His mission truly was? (Luke 2:42-52)
5. What do you make of Mary's role in Jesus's first public miracle? (John 2:1-11) What was the resulting impact on the disciples?
6. What do we learn about deep faithfulness through Mary's appearance not only at the foot of the cross, but also with the gathering of believers after Jesus's death and resurrection?

