

Mike Bickle: Today's Christians Need to Become More Like This Godly Woman

The Christmas story is a remarkable testimony of how the Father used a young lady to partner with Him in bringing His Son to the earth. It is a glorious story that reveals how He leads His people and how He wants them to respond to His leadership.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary she would conceive and bear the Messiah, Mary responded by trusting the Lord's leadership. God is looking for this kind of heart response in His people.

As we look at the Christmas story, we should not merely admire the nobility of Mary's choices. In fact, Mary's life is a model that can inspire us to respond rightly to God's leadership throughout our lives, especially in seasons when circumstances become difficult.

Good News

Gabriel visited Mary, saying, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Luke 1:28b, NKJV).

Can you imagine Gabriel appearing to you and declaring such wonderful things about your life? You would expect that being favored by God would mean you would have a life of remarkable blessed circumstances. However, the glorious promises of God that Mary received would unfold slowly through many surprising, difficult seasons. Mary would need to hold on to and remember Gabriel's encouraging words throughout her life as she carried the promises of God in her heart.

After greeting Mary, Gabriel told her she would conceive by

the Holy Spirit and bear a Son, Jesus. He revealed to Mary that her Son would be great and would be called the Son of the Highest. Her Son, Jesus, would be given the throne of David and would reign forever. Gabriel was summarizing what Isaiah had prophesied hundreds of years earlier: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

Mary knew these prophetic Scriptures well, and now Gabriel told her she would bear the Messiah of whom they foretold. But instead of shrinking back in fear or unbelief, Mary responded to these glorious promises with a willing heart for God to do to her as He had said. She believed Him.

Gabriel's initial charge for Mary to rejoice was a practical, pastoral exhortation she would engage in for the rest of her life as she carried these promises in her heart. It was not a one-time call of exuberance to explode with joy at the possibility of what was happening. Through the troubles and misunderstandings Mary would experience, she would continually need to lay hold of the command to rejoice and trust the Lord's good leadership in her life. Choosing to rejoice in God's promises despite hardship would realign Mary's heart repeatedly in the years ahead, strengthening her to persevere and to continue to grow in faith.

Favor and Adversity

What does a life look like under the favor of God? It is easy to miss some of the unexpected hardships Mary endured for decades to come. As spoken by the angel Gabriel, Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit. God was with her, but she initially experienced tremendous amounts of shame. After being visited by Gabriel, Mary traveled 100 miles south to Judah and spent over three months with Elizabeth. When Mary returned home to Nazareth, she was visibly pregnant. This was a serious

issue because she had already been engaged to Joseph.

In the ancient world, a broken engagement would require a legal divorce. If she had been with another man, Mary would have been guilty by law to be stoned. Her story was that God made her pregnant. Mary would have seemed like a bold-faced liar or so delusional that it would have been another problem. Her fiancé, Joseph, was deeply troubled, and rumors were spreading throughout her community. Over 30 years later, these same rumors of Mary's fornication were still being passed around in Jerusalem (John 8:41).

Before God stepped in and told him Mary was telling the truth, Joseph was planning to break off his relationship with her. The Lord was dramatically using Mary, but she experienced intense shame and misunderstanding from those she loved most. Through it all, Mary's heart was growing in love, faith and humility.

The way we grow in mature love, faith and humility is by choosing to trust God again and again in the face of unexpected hardships and the unexpected delay of some of His promises to us. When we are perplexed and want to operate in the flesh, but instead choose to stop and say, "God, I trust Your leadership," we are realigning our hearts with His heart and promises. In believing God's promises and responding with faith and gratitude despite difficulties, we are rejoicing as Mary did. Through this process of realigning our heart even thousands of times, we slowly grow in love, faith and humility. Mary did this repeatedly throughout her life, and, as she did, she matured in her love for the Lord and in her confidence in His good leadership.

Toward the end of Mary's pregnancy, she had to make the long, intense journey to Bethlehem with Joseph for the census. After they arrived, she was ready to give birth, but there was no room for them in the inn. She went through the agony of labor in a dirty stable and then had only a manger in which to lay

her beloved newborn Son. I would have thought that since the angel Gabriel told Mary God's favor was upon her and she would bear a Son who would reign forever, the circumstances around His birth would have been a bit easier. Mary had received these great promises and endured the months of intense shame, but now she did not even have a proper place to deliver and care for her Son.

Despite the difficulties and human dynamics Mary experienced, a series of supernatural events surrounded Jesus' birth. Shortly after Jesus was born, some excited shepherds showed up, looking for a baby in a manger. An angel had told them Christ the Savior had been born and was lying in a manger. The shepherds tell Mary they saw a host of angels praising God over her Son's birth. Later on, when Mary and Joseph went to dedicate Jesus in Jerusalem, two prophetic witnesses, Simeon and Anna, testified of Jesus' glorious identity. Afterward, wise men from the East brought gifts and came to worship Jesus.

After all Mary had endured since Gabriel's visit, these things confirmed the promises over Jesus' life and encouraged Mary that God was really with her. After all these glorious confirmations of the Lord's promises, I would have expected things to be a bit easier for Mary in the coming years. But although God was moving powerfully in Mary's life, the difficulties, delays and opportunities for discouragement were not over.

Not long after the Magi left, an angel visited Joseph in a dream, warning him to flee with his family to Egypt because Herod wanted to kill Jesus. Imagine this. Young Mary had borne the stigma and shame of her pregnancy among her friends and relatives; now she had to temporarily flee with her family to a foreign land because the government sought to destroy her little boy. Is this what a blessed and favored life looks like? There are sometimes very unexpected challenges in the midst of fully receiving and walking out the Lord's good

promises.

Things became even more difficult for Mary down the road. Joseph was still there when Jesus was 12, but Mary was widowed sometime after that. Matthew 13:55-56 says Jesus had four brothers and several sisters. What does a widowed woman do with seven or eight children in their teens and younger? In addition to experiencing the pain and trauma of losing her husband, Mary would have faced incredible pressure as a widow with so many children.

When Jesus was 30, He took six weeks off from the carpenter's shop to fast and pray in the wilderness. He returned home anointed by the Holy Spirit, and then the whole town He loved and grew up in turned against Him. He was a most reliable young man and had a phenomenal reputation; however, the elders of the synagogue were enraged by His claim to be the one of whom Isaiah prophesied. They were so angry they tried to drive Him off a cliff and kill Him (Luke 4:29).

Mary saw how her Son was so badly mistreated by the leaders of the town He grew up in, and she would have needed to realign her heart again and again in faith with the promises of God throughout His ministry. The angel Gabriel had initially told Mary that Jesus would be great (Luke 1:32). She must have struggled, wondering why the elders of His hometown were so against Him.

After Jesus began His ministry, His brothers did not believe Him (John 7:5). In essence, Mary's own children—whom she raised to honor the God of Israel—did not “believe in Jesus” even as young adults. Mary must have struggled with the spiritual condition of her sons at the time of Jesus' ministry. Some of her closest friends and family members considered Him to be mentally unstable because of the things He said and did (Mark 3:21). The top religious leaders in the nation concluded Jesus was demonized and was thus a dangerous cult leader who was deceiving the people (John 7:47, 8:48).

Rumors of Jesus' mother's fornication were passed around in their attempt to discredit Him and His ministry (John 8:41).

In other words, Jesus' life and ministry did not appear to be "great" as Gabriel promised. By many standards, it seemed to be just the opposite. Again and again, Mary had to believe the promises of God and trust His good leadership.

A few years later, Mary watched her Son be rejected by the nation and die on a cross. The religious leaders plotted against Jesus, and the Jewish crowds cried out for Barabbas. Jesus' three and a half years of ministry appeared to have little fruit. He had healed many thousands, but only 120 people believed in Him enough to make it to the prayer meeting in the upper room after His Resurrection (Acts 1:15). Mary endured unexpected pain and misunderstanding as she partnered with God and trusted His leadership in her life. Now her Son's earthly ministry came to an end, and He was rejected by the nation rather than exalted as King. The promises were long in coming, and it seemed impossible for them to be fulfilled. However, Mary had trusted God from the beginning, and she persevered in trust by the grace of God even here.

Mary only saw a partial fulfillment of the promises during her lifetime. She conceived by the Holy Spirit and brought forth the Son of God into the world according to the word of the Lord given through Gabriel. However, Gabriel also told Mary that her Son would be great and reign forever. While Jesus was on the earth, He was despised by many and rejected by His brothers, His hometown and the top political and spiritual leaders of His nation. He suffered and died to bring salvation to sinners before He was raised in glory.

The complete fulfillment of the promises over His life will not be until the age to come. A day is coming when He will be seen by all as great in love, power and mercy. Mary would have seen a glimpse of this during the revivals of the early church, but the fullness is yet future.

The Heart of Mary

Mary's life is a picture of the right heart-response to the leadership of God. When she did not fully understand, she trusted God's leadership over and over again. When it seemed to cost her everything, Mary still said, "May it be unto me according to Your word" (Luke 1:38b, MEV).

Mary's trust in God and her willingness to be used by Him and "to rejoice" in Him were not a one-time response. It was her way of life. She signed up time and time again through the difficulties. She trusted God and repeatedly realigned her heart with God's word.

Rather than give up when things got hard, Mary persevered with joy by the grace of God.

Too often, we lose faith that God will fulfill His promises because we are not seeing immediate results to our prayers. Or we may conclude that our weak prayers are ineffectual. But the truth is that we offer our prayers in human weakness, but they ascend to God in power because of the sufficiency of the blood of Jesus and because they are in agreement with God's heart.

How do we demonstrate the faith of Mary even when our prayers feel weak or ineffective? Instead of measuring the effectiveness of our prayers by the results we see or the emotions we feel during a particular prayer time, we must measure it by what God says in His Word. Jesus declared in the Word that everyone who asks and keeps on asking will receive, and everyone who seeks and keeps on seeking will find (Matt. 7:7-8).

Our prayers—all of them—are heard, even if we do not feel anything when we offer them. Do not measure your prayers by how you feel when you pray them but by the extent to which they are in agreement with God's will and Word. Beloved, our weak prayer times may not move us, but they move the heart of God.

The apostle John emphasized that we can have confidence that our prayers are heard regardless of how we feel while we are praying. In 1 John 5:14, he wrote, "This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us."

God assesses the activity in our lives very differently than the way we assess it with our natural minds. The fullness of the glory of our lives in Christ is hidden from our own eyes as well as from the eyes of others in this age. Yet both the glory of God and the promises made to Mary will become evident to all when Jesus appears at His Second Coming.

Colossians 3:3-4 says, "For you are dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life shall appear, then you also shall appear with Him in glory."

The challenge is that often we do not see the glory of God in our lives. Because it is indiscernible and hidden from our emotions and our five senses, we cannot measure it. We look at our lives as small, weak and boring, and yet Jesus sees them through the lens of the riches of glory. He sees what we don't see, and that includes our prayers.

Our many small acts of obedience, including our prayers, are glorious in God's eyes. By understanding the value of our weak prayers, we are empowered to see them as relevant and powerful. Though they may seem weak according to the flesh, every prayer in God's will matters to God.

The way God led and used Mary reflects His perfect leadership. The fulfillment of God's promises is often delayed and released in stages in a context of difficulty, in order to cause us to cling to Him in a way that helps us grow in love, faith and humility.

Being used by God to change history is not the same as being mature in love. God called Mary and then brought her on a journey to grow in greater love. God unfolds His purposes in a

hostile world and uses the adversity to bring forth His people in mature love, humility and partnership.

God desires to partner with those who will trust Him through everything and continually say yes to Him without quitting. Like Mary, we need to realign our hearts in agreement with the promises of God and trust His leadership even in difficulties. God's promises are still real when delay and adversity come; the Lord uses these things for our good (Rom. 8:28).

When we choose to rejoice, hold on to the promises and trust God through the challenges, He releases grace and empowers us to persevere with joy and grow in love. If we do our part and respond to Him with a willing heart, God will do His part and impart abundant grace.

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