

THE STORY

Adult Sunday School Lesson Guide

Chapter 22

The Birth of a King

Timeless Truth: The Word became flesh.

Teacher's Background Notes

When asked about the great women of faith, most Christians will answer with Ruth, Sarah or Esther. Perhaps even Deborah comes to mind. Few regard Mary as more than a figurine in the nativity scene that we dust off every year to celebrate the birth of Christ. Mary is among the least understood of our biblical characters. Although we hear the birth story of Jesus retold each and every Christmas, few Christians embrace the lessons that we can learn from this brave woman. The focus is always on Mary's Son so the richness of Mary's faith, courage, and humble obedience is easily overlooked. Yet very few Bible characters exhibit the selflessness and trust that she models. She is indeed worthy of more study, for all of us should strive for such a fullness of faith.

Most evangelicals have diminished the role of Mary largely in response to Catholic veneration of her. It is a distinct possibility that your class may have students who come from Catholic backgrounds. If so, they may have a very different view of Mary. Most others will not have given her much thought at all. Early tradition holds that Mary moved to Ephesus with John the Apostle after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D where early church history states she died. But a few centuries later, thoughts about Mary began to change. In the 4-5th centuries, under the influence of asceticism, it became offensive to say that Mary remained Joseph's wife. Bishop Siricius, who died in 398, wrote, "For the Lord Jesus would never choose to be born of a virgin if he knew that she would be so incontinent as to stain the place of his birth, the home of the Eternal King, with the semen of sexual relations." Doctrines of Mary developed from there. Catholics still affirm the perpetual virginity of Mary which became accepted based largely upon the Gnostic influence that viewed the physical world as evil. Yet the idea would be totally foreign to the Hebrew thought of blessedness. Fertility was considered a blessing while childlessness was considered a curse (Deut. 28). The biblical text states that Mary was a virgin "before they came together," (Matt. 1:18) and that Joseph "had no union with her until she gave birth," (Matt. 1:25). Catholics maintain that Mary is the Mother of God while Protestants downplay her uniqueness. The title *Mother of God* was approved at the Council of Ephesus to denote the full and complete deity of Christ. But it evolved into the exaltation of Mary as co-redeemer. Later, Augustine suggested that Mary was innocent of any conscious sin and debate grew about her original sin. That led to the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception which became the official teaching of the Catholic Church in 1854. It is taught that Mary herself was conceived without original or actual sin. Finally, Mary is said not to have died but rather she was miraculously transported—body and soul—to heaven by her Son, based on fourth century

THE WHOLE FAMILY | THE WHOLE BIBLE | THE WHOLE YEAR

stories. This contrasts the writings of the early church fathers. Quite obviously she is no small controversial figure.

What started as the “Mother of God” title to affirm the deity of Christ became a major division between two streams of Christian thought. The development of Mary’s doctrines is one of the most striking differences between Catholics and Evangelicals. In response to the Catholic elevation of Mary, Evangelicals have downplayed her role as a pious woman of faith, as a tender and devoted mother, and as a model of sacrificial servanthood. This lesson strives to present a biblically balanced view of this young woman who serves as a model of great faith for women and men alike.

Lesson Plan: Mary, A Woman of Faith

In the old TV game show *To Tell the Truth*, a panel of celebrity contestants questioned three people who all claimed to be the same man or woman. One guest was who he said he was and he had usually done something notable or held an unusual occupation. After some often humorous questioning, the celebrity panel had the difficult task of guessing which of the guests was the authentic and eliminate the imposters. The host then asked the now-famous question, “Will the real _____ please stand up?” The identity of the authentic person was then revealed.

Her face can be found in the alcoves of cathedrals, to the humblest of nativity sets, and even on a 10-year-old grilled cheese sandwich that sold for \$28,000 on Ebay.

Show the PowerPoint presentation, [Adult_SS_Ch22_Mary_In_The_Toast.ppt](#), showing the ludicrous places the image of Mary has shown up.

So today we ask a similar question, “Will the real Mary of Nazareth please stand up?”

I. Mary the Maiden

Mary the young maiden must have had faithful parents as her model. Very little is known about Mary before we meet her in Scripture. Nevertheless, her actions and her words betray a young woman steeped in humble faith.

- A. Mary was a descendent of King David on her father’s side through David’s son Nathan. Although all Israelites were aware of the connection between the royal line and the coming Messiah, her anticipation may have been heightened because of her genealogical lineage back to David.
- B. Mary’s mother would likely have been a Levite, or indirectly tied to the Levites. Mary’s close relative Elizabeth was a Levite from the family of Aaron. Her husband was a priest in the temple.
- C. It is likely, then, that Mary’s home would have been deeply influenced by the faithful remnant of her mother’s family. They would have participated regularly in the annual feasts. They would have observed Sabbath worship. They knew the Law of God, probably read or sung Psalms, and discussed faithful obedience with Mary as she grew up and matured, for the Law instructed faithful parents to do so (Deut. 6:7, 11:19)



- D. The proper education of children was highly valued by the Hebrew community and it was considered to be a community responsibility. Many Psalms and the Proverbs were composed as teaching tools. Ps. 78:1-8 captures the vision of the faithful who looked toward teaching their children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren “that they should put their confidence in God, and not forget the works of God, and keep His commandments,” (Ps. 78:7).
- E. Mary would have been taught the necessary skills to manage a household. She had to learn to prepare meals, weave fabric, and other domestic work.

II. Mary the Model of Faith

Mary responded to the angelic visitation by faith, making her a model for all believers, but especially for other women.

- A. Most scholars estimate that Mary was likely in her mid-teens, perhaps 14-16 years old when she was engaged to Joseph. Hebrew marriages had two stages: the betrothal and the wedding. The betrothal was legally binding and usually lasted about a year while the groom prepared a proper abode for his new bride. It was during this period that Mary would have been preparing for her new role.
- B. The first time we meet her in Scripture, she is visited by Gabriel who tells her that she is the recipient of God’s special grace (Lu. 1:28).
 - 1. The angel said Mary was “highly favored” and “blessed among women.” Yet Mary did not perceive herself as special. “She was very perplexed at this statement and kept wondering what kind of greeting this was.” (Lu. 1:28-29). Instead, she simply saw herself as a “servant.” (Lu. 1:38)
 - 2. God always sees us differently than we see ourselves. For He alone has perfect sight.
- C. He then tells her she will bear a child, and five things about Him (Lu. 1:32-33)
 - 1. He will be great
 - 2. He will be called the Son of the Most High. This term indicated that her son would be equal with YHWH. In Hebrew thought, a “son” was exactly likened to his father. He possessed the qualities that his father possessed. This son would be deity—God in human flesh.
 - 3. He will be given the throne of His father David. Mary would have understood that the angel was referring to the Messiah who had been promised to Israel so long ago (2 Sam. 7:16, Isa. 9:6-7).
 - 4. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.
 - 5. His kingdom will never end. Again, Mary knew her Scriptures so she must have immediately thought of the special promises to King David (2 Sam. 7:13-16).
- D. What is remarkable is Mary’s response! Mary models true faith for us.
 - 1. She trusted the Lord to make it happen. She does not seem at all surprised that the Messiah was to come. She does not need any clarification about the uniqueness and divinity of the child she would bear. She never



doubted the angel's words but simply asked, "How?" since she was a virgin.

2. She was willing to serve the Lord. She humbly responded, "Behold, the servant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."
3. She was willing to suffer for her obedience and service to the Lord. The angel came to her alone. What she did *not* ask is also remarkable. She did not ask how she would explain this to her family. She did not ask questions about herself. An unwed pregnant woman in Israel was a big deal! She would surely lose her husband. The angel did not tell her that he would speak to Joseph. She had no guarantee that it would all work out. She simply obeyed. She was willing to suffer the loss of her husband by obeying God. She never lived down her reputation for an illegitimate pregnancy. When Jesus faced off with the Pharisees, they self-righteously pointed out the stigma of his birth. "We are not illegitimate children!" (Jn. 8:41)
4. She faithfully obeyed knowing that perhaps no one but God Himself would ever know the whole truth. Obedience always has a cost.

III. **Mary: The *Magnificat*** (p. 256-257, Lu. 1:46-55)

After the angel left and the shock wore off, Mary needed the support of another woman of faith. So she turned to Elizabeth, her mature, older mentor and cousin.

- A. Elizabeth affirmed the blessedness of the child which must have given Mary great joy and comfort.
- B. Mary broke out in a beautiful song, often called her *Magnificat*, which comes from the Latin which means "magnifies" or "glorifies."
- C. Her song reveals much about Mary.
 1. She recognized her own need for a Savior. (Lu. 1:46)
 2. She recognized her part in God's Upper Story (Lu. 1:48)
 3. She had an intimate relationship with God, as she praised him for His work on her behalf personally (1:48), for His holiness (1:49), for his mercy (1:50).
 4. Her song reveals her knowledge of the Scriptures. It is very similar to Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:1-10) and it quotes a couple of Psalms. She praises Him for His faithfulness to Israel. Again, she realizes that she is part of God's Upper Story of redemption based upon the promises He made to Abraham and others throughout Israel's history (Lu. 1:55).
- D. Mary's example of praise serves as yet another model for us today. We cannot praise like Mary if we do not know God like Mary did. Her praise was God-focused.
- E. The *Magnificat* tells us that Mary's faith was not based on emotion but on the knowledge of God's purpose and faithfulness in the past as recorded in the Scriptures.



IV. Applications

- A. Never underestimate the spiritual influence of your home. Mary was the product of faith-filled parents (and probably teachers, role models, grandparents, etc.) who prepared her to trust in God in the face of difficult circumstances.
- B. Likewise, never underestimate the faith of a young person. Mary was just a teen but she exercised extraordinary faith, character and strength.
- C. Mary, like Abraham and all other chosen ones, was not chosen because of her own righteousness, but by grace. That God allows us the privilege of participating in His work and His plan is always by grace.
- D. Like Mary, I can trust the Lord to work out the impossible details of life.
- E. I can be willing to serve the Lord when He calls me. I should pray like Mary, “Behold, the servant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”
- F. Mary “pondered these things in her heart.” She had a devotional life of meditating on the events and incidents that she did not fully understand. But she wisely pondered them anyway.
- G. I can learn from Mary to be obedient in the face of ridicule, suffering and personal loss.
- H. I will not be like the Pharisees by looking down my nose at illegitimate children or others who experience less-than-ideal family situations.
- I. Obedience always has a cost. Am I willing to obey faithfully even at great personal expense?
- J. Purity is still honorable, even if our culture fails to recognize its virtue.
- K. Mary turned to Elizabeth for support. I, too, need mature, Christian support from friends or relatives when faced with difficult circumstances in life.

Learning Activity: Panel Discussion on Unplanned Pregnancies

Christians cannot be both pro-life and anti-unwed mothers. The goal of this learning activity aims to cultivate a deeper understanding of the experience of unwed mothers, cultivate compassion rather than scorn, and perhaps spur class participants toward ministry action. Sadly, Christians are often perceived as less compassionate than non-Christians—sometimes rightly and sometimes not. Therefore, use special sensitivity with this activity. Prepare a panel of women and men who have experienced the difficulties of an unwed pregnancy. Set up your room so that the panel is easily seen and heard by class participants. People to consider: parents of an unwed, teen mother who handled the situation with Christ-like character; unwed mothers and fathers who are willing to share their experience; adult children conceived out of wedlock. Be prepared with several experience-related questions for your panel to respond to. Moderate the questions from class participants to keep the discussion flowing.

- Please describe for us what you experienced.
- What role has your faith played in facing this situation?
- How did Christians and non-Christians treat you through this experience?
- Have any specific ministries helped you cope or helped meet your needs?
- What are some dos and don'ts for us as we minister to others in similar circumstances?



Learning Activity: Group Discussion

1. Mary was the product of faith-filled parents and probably teachers, role models such as Elizabeth and grandparents. Who has had the most influence upon your faith development and why?
2. How does Mary's example influence your spiritual goals for your children (or future children) and what practical things can you do to achieve them?
3. There is very little statistical difference between the purity of Christian youth and the purity of non-Christian youth. What are some realistic ways that parents and church can partner together to guide our young men and women toward a life of purity?

