

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Women: Mary, the mother of Christ

Introduction

I recall visiting my old junior school head teacher some years ago. He was a godly man who had encouraged my parents to keep me on at the secondary school I had attended. In fact, as we were a large but poor family, he lent them some financial support in order for them to do so. Upon retirement from teaching, he became a priest in the Church of England. It was after this, I was able to visit him and return some of the bread he had previously cast upon the waters. Bible reading Christians will understand this principle.

Her Purity

During that visit, we spoke about the Virgin Mary. He believed that the word for "virgin" meant "damsel". This may be the case in Hebrew where the word can mean "concealment" or "an unmarried female". It is used in the prophecy: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bare a son and his name shall be called Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). However, I remarked that when the Holy Spirit spoke through Matthew and Luke in the first chapters of their Gospels, He used the Greek word that actually meant "virgin" - one who had not experienced sexual intercourse. We then profitably considered together the reasons why Jesus, the Son of God, had to be born of a virgin as the prophet had predicted.

Unfortunately, we live in a day of promiscuity when it seems to be an objective of many teenagers to forego their virginity as quickly as possible. This shows us just how ungodly our society has become. The Scriptures encourage us to remain pure until the time of our marriage to another of the opposite sex. It is small wonder that there are so many people, young and old, torn apart by various sexually transmitted diseases these days. Sadly, these include those who have been contaminated by unfaithful partners. No matter what strategy the government uses to deter this promiscuity, it will fail if a fear of God is not generated within its initiative. The Bible has declared, "Be not deceived, God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting" (Galatians 6:7-8).

This is a meaningful place to start when considering the virginity of Mary. It is clear from the Scriptures in general that she was a godly person. We will later see that her faith in God was one that was able to leap barriers.

Her Purpose

In the Gospel according to Luke, we find that her lineage may be traced back to David through Nathan and back to Adam through Abraham. The promise of a Saviour is found way back in Genesis 3:15 where the defeat of the devil's seed would be the seed of the woman, namely, Christ. The devil's head would be bruised under the heel of Christ.

In Genesis 21:12, the Lord tells Abraham that his seed shall be called in Isaac rather than Ishmael. Therefore, the promise of one in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed can be traced forward to Christ. Of course, the Messiah, the Chosen One of God, the true King of Israel, was to be of David's line. Interestingly, Matthew's Gospel begins with the words: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." The chapter goes on to reveal the line of the Lord Jesus Christ going back to David through Jechoniah and Solomon. It then continues through Abraham to Adam.

This shows that the royal lineage of Christ is outlined by Matthew who emphasises the Kingship of Christ in his Gospel, while the legal line of Christ is outlined by Luke, who emphasises the Perfect Manhood of Christ. But wait, there is a problem here. Even though Jesus may be the stepson of Joseph, why wasn't Joseph himself a king if he was a direct descendant of David? The answer lies in a prophecy relating to another in the royal line. His name was Jechoniah. We read in Jeremiah 22:24-30 about this wicked man. In verse 30, the LORD decrees: "Write this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah."

How was God going to overcome this problem? Christ was to be of David's line. He is the King who was predicted to prosper on the throne of David. How could He since God had so decreed against Jechoniah? The answer - by the

virgin birth! The Lord Jesus may not have been the son of Joseph naturally, but he was nonetheless classed as his son and of his family. Furthermore, the fact that Mary's ancestry traces back to David also supports the prophecies that Jesus Christ has the legal right to the throne of Israel. He is the Branch who will be king (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

Another reason for the virgin birth of Christ relates to his holiness. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 1:18 we read: "...She was found with child of the Holy Ghost." Following this, we see assurance being given to Joseph concerning marrying Mary when he is told: "...That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost." Had Jesus been conceived by natural means, He could never have been termed holy in the sense of Luke 2:35. Because the Lord Jesus Christ was Emmanuel, God with us, then it was impossible for Him to sin.

It was through Adam that sin has passed upon all men. He fell into sin because of his affection for Eve. As a result, all those people born of natural means are sinful and therefore subject to death. However, Christ is called the last Adam in the sense that He is the Leader of a new race. This is a race made up of people for whom He submitted Himself, in love, to death. In so doing, He the Just One suffered once for sins in order to bring us, unjust sinners, back to God. He is the Head of all those who trust in Him. And although He was delivered for our offences, He was raised again for our justification. In Him, Jesus Christ the righteous, we have been made righteous in the sight of God! So the apostle Paul could write: "But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons..." (Galatians 4:4-5). Wonderful work! Believers in Christ have been made sons of God!

Her Piety

The people of Nazareth had a strong Jewish faith. As God's chosen people, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Jews believed this land was theirs, given to their ancestors whom Moses led out of Egypt. Even though the Romans, with Herod's family as their puppets, now occupied Palestine, the Jews of Galilee believed God would someday send a Messiah who would free Israel from her enemies.

Mary's faith was strong. When she was a teenager, Mary's parents made plans for her to be married, as was customary in those days. They chose Joseph of Nazareth, a carpenter, for her husband. As already mentioned he, as well as Mary, were both descendants of King David and therefore of royal blood. The engagement took place and Mary returned home to wait about a year before she would go to live with her husband as his wife. (Please note that in the Jewish culture the engagement was classed as marriage even though they did not live together and there had been no consummation).

It was at this point something amazing happened. We read about it in Luke 1:28-38: "And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her".

In this passage, we learn several things about Mary. Firstly, she was to rejoice which is the meaning of the greeting "Hail". Second, she was highly favoured by the Lord. That is to say, she was very acceptable to God. She had been a recipient of a large portion of God's grace. This would have been seen in her own gracious acts towards others. She was a model believer. Thirdly, the presence of the Lord was with her. Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was fully supporting her. Fourthly, she was blessed among women. The reason for this happiness was she had been selected by God to give birth to the Messiah. Faithful women down through the ages would have desired this privilege. (See Daniel 11:37).

Mary was not a little afraid of this message. It is worth noting that angels generally take the appearance of men when they pass on God's messages to people. To suddenly find a stranger appear and greet you in such a way would be most disturbing, especially if he shone like others in the Gospels did. The angel immediately puts her at ease; but then relates the wondrous message that told her she was to conceive and give birth to the Son of Highest (God) who would be King of the house of Jacob (Israel). His name was to be called Jesus (meaning: "Yahweh who saves.")

She asked how - seeing she had not had sexual intercourse with any man. The angel explained that this would come about by the action of Holy Spirit and the power of God. The child born would be none other than the holy Son of God.

Notice that the Son of God existed before being born of Mary. We read in Hebrews 7:3 that the "little known about" Melchisedec could be compared to the Son of God because he had no father, no mother, no descent, no beginning of days and no end of life. Therefore, Mary was the instrument used by God to give His Son a human body. We must also remember that Christ is God the Son and is so eternally. God also has no beginning and no end. He always was, is and will be - the I AM that I AM. However, to take up the words of Mary's cousin Elisabeth who called Mary, "The mother of my Lord" we can see that Jesus had the authority to which Elisabeth would submit (Luke 1:43). In passing, we can also see that an above six month old baby in the womb is able to have joy because John the Baptist, yet in the womb of Elisabeth, "leaped for joy" when Mary had greeted her cousin (compare Luke 1:36 and 44).

Mary calls herself "the handmaid of the Lord". The Greek word for handmaid actually means "bondwoman". It is the lowest point of servitude. She fully submitted her will to the will of the Lord regardless of the shame and suffering that might so easily have followed. For the Jew, unfaithfulness while engaged would result in a public divorce. While one who committed adultery in marriage would be stoned to death under the Law of the Old Testament. So Mary faced some troubling questions with only faith to guide her. What about her marriage to Joseph since she was bearing a child that was not his? How could she explain to Joseph the mysterious act of God and an angel no one else saw?

God was supporting her behind the scenes. The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." So, when Joseph woke up, he thought little of the shame that would follow and he took Mary as his wife to his home. Together they would do the Will of God.

Her Praise

Later we see Mary visiting her relative Elizabeth, the elderly wife of Zacharias who served as a priest in the temple at Jerusalem. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit gave Mary the assurance that all these things would be fulfilled Luke 1:41-45. This brought a Godward response from Mary. She proclaimed that her soul magnified the Lord and that her spirit rejoiced in God her Saviour. Mark these words. Mary acknowledged herself as one who needed a personal saviour. She acknowledged her low estate. She spoke of the honour given to her by God. She praised the God who exalted the humble, fed the hungry and showed mercy to Israel. O that our worship was as fruitful.

Her Pain

After the birth of Jesus, according to Luke's Gospel, Mary and Joseph fulfilled what Jewish law customarily required when a child was born. Eight days later, they had the child circumcised and gave him the name Jesus. After 40 days, they took him to the temple at Jerusalem to consecrate him to God. There, the old man Simeon and the old woman Anna recognised the child's extraordinary mission. He was God's salvation before the face of Israel and a light to lighten the Gentiles. Taking him into his arms, Simeon said to Mary his mother: "You see this child: he is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected – and a sword shall pierce your own soul, to – so that the secrets of many hearts may be laid bare" So it was that the shameful death by crucifixion was predicted. There Christ would be made a curse for all who were under the bondage of the Law.

Many years later, she stood beneath the cross at Jesus' death. (John 19:25-27). She was comforted as Jesus committed her to the charge of John. She was to be John's mother and John was to be her son. On the other hand, how she must have wept to see her own sinless Son dying the most shameful of deaths imaginable for a Jew because accursed of God is everyone who hangs upon a tree.

Her Presence

Shortly following the birth of Jesus, the shepherds came and saw the baby Jesus lying in a manger. When they left, we read of Mary: "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). A considerable time later, we have the visit of the wise men from the east presenting their gifts. We read: "And when they were come into the house (not the manger this time) they saw the young child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshipped HIM..." (Matthew 2:11). Notice that it does not say that they worshipped Mary! Mary is not to be made an object of worship. Following this incident, Joseph was told in a dream to take the child to Egypt because His life was in jeopardy. Mary submitted to her husband and the long journey was made. Both Matthew and Luke suddenly end their accounts of Jesus' early days when he settles with his family at Nazareth. Except for Luke's story of the pilgrimage of the boy Jesus to Jerusalem, the Gospels are silent about Jesus and Mary until his public life begins.

Her Panic

Every year his parents would go to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover (Luke 2:41). When Jesus was twelve years old, they went up for the feast as usual. When they were on their way home to Nazareth after the feast, Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without his parents knowing it. They assumed he was with the caravan. This was a mistake. It was only after a day's journey that they went to look for him among their relations and acquaintances. When they failed to find him, the worried parents rushed back to Jerusalem, looking for him everywhere. Three days later, they found him in the temple, sitting among the doctors, listening to them and asking them questions; and all those who heard him were astounded at his intelligence and his replies. Mary asked Him why He had treated them in such a way. Jesus informed her that he had to be about His Father's business. Neither Mary nor Joseph really understood what He meant.

John's Gospel speaks twice of Mary. At Cana in Galilee she attends a wedding with Jesus and His disciples (John 2:1-12). Soon the wine ran out. Mary, meaning well, approached Jesus and told Him they had run no wine left. Jesus' reply: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" showed that He was the One who had the initiative. It was no longer her place to tell Him what to do. Nonetheless, even when admonished, her faith in her Son remained sure because she told the servants to do as He commanded. They did and the water of purification was turned into the wine of rejoicing.

Her Prayer.

Finally, we see Mary at a prayer meeting (Acts 1:14). She had watched her Son die, but knew Him to be risen from among the dead. She was now one of those who continued with one accord in prayer and supplication. May this be our position while we wait for Him to come.

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