

The Gospel According To Mary

Valley Center
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The birth of Jesus Christ means everything to us. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, mankind had been looking forward to the Promised One. Eve felt sure that her first born would be him, and named him Cain saying, "I have gotten a man, the Lord" (that is how Genesis 4:1 reads literally in Hebrew). But of course, Cain wasn't the one. The blood he shed was that of his brother in taking life. The true Messiah would shed His own blood to give life.

Centuries passed. Millennia went by. At last, according to the wisdom of God, the time had come. It must have thrilled the angels to learn that God would come as a baby, not an adult as Adam had been created. As the years transpired, they had witnessed the declination of humanity in every aspect: height, longevity, intellect and morality. To imagine that their beloved Commander would become man, and be born into the human race after 4,000 years of sin must have elicited their admiration and wonder.

Quite a bit of His plan had been laid out. A devout believer at the appointed time could have known, through prophetic insight, many things:

The place of His birth (Bethlehem; Micah 5:2)

His lineage (of the house of David; Isaiah 11:1-3)

The approximate time of His arrival (Daniel 9:24-27)

The miraculous circumstances of His birth (Isaiah 7:14)

How sad it must have been for the angels to look down and see that only a few were truly looking for Him. Aside from a handful, most were busy in their everyday lives, absorbed in the interests of the things of this world and not the next. The greatest event in the history of the world, up to that point, was about to be proclaimed, and to whom did the angels sing? The religious leaders in Jerusalem? The priests in their gorgeous robes? No, humble shepherds who were out in fields watching their sheep on the same hillsides as David had done 1000 years before.

But let's go back to the announcement made to Mary nine months previous to the Bethlehem's event. I believe the message given to Mary has two lessons of crucial importance for us. It's this announcement I want us to study today.

We don't know much about her. When the time came close, the angels must have wondered to whom this blessed responsibility would be given. Who would be the one to bear the Christ child? To whom would God entrust the upbringing of His Son? Popular artist's renderings picture her as a teenager, but I wonder if God would commit this great task to one of limited experience.



The Bible tells us nothing specifically about her age, but there are a few clues that stimulate our thought. We are told that she was the cousin of Elizabeth. It's not always true that cousins are the same age, but nevertheless, we might consider that there would be a presumption that their ages would have been similar. What are we told about Elizabeth? She had been barren, but then conceived and gave birth to John in her old age (Luke 1:7). The praise song of Mary ("He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant" Luke 1:48) is quite similar to the confession of Elizabeth ("Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men" Luke 1:25). Could it be that God had selected one of the "unchosen," one that had been passed by?

Her name was Mary, a fairly common name in that time and culture. There were two other Mary's at the cross. (Mark 15:40) The name grew from Old Testament roots, coming from the Hebrew *marah*, meaning "bitter," and being associated with the name Miriam, the sister of Moses.

Here's how the Bible describes Mary's experience: "Now in the sixth month (of Elizabeth's pregnancy) the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, 'Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women! And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a

Son, and shall call His name JESUS.' Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.'" Luke 1:26-28, 31.

As we consider the following points, we'll keep in mind the facts as they applied literally to Mary 2,000 years ago, and how they apply to us today. The five aspects we wish to consider are:

- The **Promise** of the event
- The **Power** that made it possible
- The **Pondering** of Mary
- The **Permission** of Mary
- The **Perplexity** of unbelievers

Since the inception of sin, the promise had been made that a Redeemer would one day come and conquer. In the Garden of Eden, after the tragic sin of Adam and Eve, The Lord foretold of One who would bruise the head of the serpent. Like shining stars in the sky, prophets added their testimony to the array of promises predicting the Messiah's arrival. Isaiah, Micah, David, Moses, Daniel and even Balaam applied their brushes to this prophetic picture.

God was true to His promise; He cannot lie. What He said would happen did! Though it might seem to take longer than what some wanted, His promise came true. Jesus Christ (Jesus the Messiah) was born, and every one who cites a date in history as "B.C." or "A.D." confesses the reality of that event. His birth is the fulcrum of history, the turning point of mankind's experience. Even those who recoil from things religious and prefer the "Before Common Era" instead of "Before Christ" nevertheless unwillingly testify to this when they use His birth as the reference point!

God needed to do something special in order to fulfill the requirements of salvation. The One Who would save humanity would **have to be divine**, since only the sacrifice of One equal to the law broken, and One Who could represent the whole of humanity as the Creator Who brought mankind into existence could suffice. Not the life of an angel could be offered to save us. No one among the sinful human race could qualify; only God could. "He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor; therefore His own arm brought salvation." Isaiah 59:16.

A few days ago, Wednesday December 5, in Detroit Michigan Alexis Goggins became a hero when she stepped in front of a gunman to save her mother and was shot six times, losing an eye in the ordeal. The mom, Felithia Parker, said that she'd broken up with Calvin Tilly, but was afraid that he would hurt her. She called a girl friend to pick her up at her house, when Tilly accosted her and held a 9mm gun to the girlfriend's head, forcing her to drive the mom and her daughter in the SUV. The girlfriend said she needed to get gas and pulled into a station and called 911.



Police say that Tilly started firing the gun at Felithia, but Alexis screamed and told him to stop, and positioned herself between him and her mom, taking the next six bullets. According to the report in the Detroit Free Press she covered her mom's body with hers. She was hit in the eye, temple, chin, cheek, chest and arm, and lost an eye in the shooting but is in stable condition. The mom suffered wounds to her head and arm, but was treated and released from the hospital. Police are calling first-grader Alexis a hero, and have credited her with saving her mother's life. Imagine the courage of that daughter in putting her own life in jeopardy. And yet, that's what Jesus, the Son of God did for us! He took the bullets so we could live!

The Savior of the world must be divine, but He **must also be part of the human race also**. The Sacrifice must be divine, but the Example must be human. He must have a divine as well as a human nature, order to show us how to live and obey. Of what encouragement would it be to the lost race for God, in His glory, to come and untouched by our feelings and experiences, and point the way? No, Jesus must drink the cup of human woe; He must walk the dusty path of trial and hardship. He must know what it means to be

hungry, tired, tried and tempted. Only then could He, as our Pathfinder, invite us to follow Him.

But how could this be accomplished? God devised a miraculous plan, by which Mary, a woman who had not had marital relations with anyone, would nevertheless become pregnant. Don't attempt to understand this from a physiological sense. Don't look in history for any precedents. This was something as unique as it was marvelous. It defies logic and reason from any human point of view.

But when you think about it, why should it be thought incredible that the Creator God, who first formed Adam and Eve and gave them the ability to procreate, could not Himself bring about the pregnancy of Mary? He is God! Through the mighty agency of the Holy Spirit she would conceive and bring forth her Son. Thus the Christ Child would have a divine nature, through the parentage of the Holy Spirit, as well as a human nature through Mary.

Mary was human, and the announcement of these things brought questions to her mind. While the Lord provided answers to many things, yet not all of the details were revealed to her. There were still a multitude of things she wondered about. Following the visit of the shepherds at Bethlehem we're told, "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." Luke 2:19.

But here's the point: though not all things were disclosed, there was **sufficient information for her to believe** the promise. Yes, there were things she didn't understand. There were still many unknowns. This would be a journey of faith for Mary. But her response to the angelic message is precious: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." Luke 1:38.

Her ancestor Sarah, when given a promise (the birth of Isaac) that seemed impossible to fulfill, demonstrated her doubt by laughter. Abraham himself struggled with accepting the promise and fell on the ground in hilarity (Genesis 17:17). But Mary submitted and gave her permission ("let it be") for this to happen. She said, "Yes." Her faith took hold of the promise, though the facts would come later.

And true to His word, Mary became with Child. How she must have wondered and marveled as the Child grew within her! How she must have reflected on the miracle of this phenomenon! But there was no mistaking it; there was no denying the changes that were taking

place within her, changes that were beginning to be seen from the outside as well. This was real!

What Mary knew to be true in her heart, was not viewed in the same light by those whose faith was weak. Be assured that the calendar counting, tongue wagging townsfolk were quick in their mathematics and quick to gossip on the strange and unaccountable event in Mary's life. She had been engaged to Joseph when Gabriel came; but the marriage between Mary and Joseph didn't take place till later. There wasn't enough time between the wedding feast and the birth of her Son to allow for normal gestation. "How did you say that this happened, Mary?" And what about the reputation of Joseph, taking such a one as his bride?

The raised eyebrows, the not-so-cautious whispers, the incredulous looks and the usage of "that word" all formed crosses that Mary and Joseph, as well as Jesus bore. There were three crosses at Calvary; there were likewise **three crosses in Nazareth**. I wonder about the first time Jesus heard "that word" spoken in reference to Him, and asked His mother what it meant. Later in His ministry, Jewish leaders who resisted His Gospel brought out the unusual nature of His birth to embarrass and discredit Him (John 8:41 "**We** were not born of fornication.>").

To those whose eyes were not open to the truth of God's ways, His birth would always be a stumbling block. What to the believer is something necessary and miraculous; to the infidel would be a stone of offense. Even today, many of those who profess to be "believers" deny the virgin birth of Jesus. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned. Only those eyes tuned to heaven's realities can see the truth of Jesus. It will remain a mystery and conundrum for those who are not willing to allow His Spirit to cultivate faith. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

These are the facts of that great event as they applied to Mary. What does His birth have to do with you and me today? Everything! It is one of the most instructive symbols of the Gospel in the entire Bible. Every part of the story has application to my spiritual walk and to yours. If you are willing to see it, the blessed and miraculous mystery of Christ's conception and birth can be the token of our salvation and regeneration. His birth is the lesson book of our new birth.

Let this analogy become real to you. Paul told the believers at Galatia, "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until **Christ**

is formed in you." Galatians 4:19. That's what happened to Mary, wasn't it? **Christ was formed in her.** Little by little, day by day, Jesus grew within her. This process began invisibly on the inside, but was translated to changes that could be seen from the outside. What happened to Mary in the literal realm is to be our experience also in the spiritual sense. This experience is the key to eternal life. "Christ **in** you, the hope of glory." Colossians 1:27.

Christ had earthly as well as heavenly parentage. Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. In a similar way, you and I, though born of human parents can also be "born of the Spirit" and be "partakers of the divine nature." II Peter 1:4.

First, there was the promise made to Mary, confirmed by a host of Scriptures given before. And, God has promised us that we can be made new in Him. This is His promise: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." Ezekiel 36:26. Remember, God doesn't lie!

All of the miracles of the Bible are given for our encouragement that God can work that greatest miracle of all, the change of sinners to saints. What Satan says is impossible; to actually change people from the inside out, so that they bear the word "Christian" not just as a paper label, but in reality they live as Christ would, God says He can do. That's His promise! That's His covenant! Both Old and New Testaments proclaim His intent to transform us into the likeness of His Son.

Sin marred and weakened the character of mankind, but God says He can remake us. Like the disfigured clay on the potter's wheel viewed by Jeremiah, God says, "I'm not going to throw it away. I'll reform it." He says, "I will make a mortal more rare than fine gold, a man more than the golden wedge of Ophir." Isaiah 13:12. This is the main business He's in: character transformation. He longs to see in us a reflection of His Son. Don't worry about His ability to architect beautiful mansions above; He's much more interested in building beautiful characters down below.

Satan says, "He can't do it; men and woman have gone too far in sin to be recovered. Yes, He can do some juggling in heaven's record books if He wants to, but the power of sin is too strong to be overcome in the lives of humans. They can't really change." God says, "That's not true. I can make men and women new. I have power to

create, and I have power to re-create. I can give new life, new birth." The promise made to Mary, though it seemed beyond belief and in fact impossible from a human perspective, nevertheless came true. And His promise can come true in our lives as well.

How was it that Mary became pregnant? She was told, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." Every word of this announcement is of vital importance to the Christian. Read this verse slowly and carefully and apply it to your own spiritual life. This is the Gospel in a nutshell. Through the experience of the new birth we can also become children of God. The **very same power** employed to give birth in the life of Mary is to be exercised in behalf of the believer to give new birth. The Holy Spirit, the "third person of the Godhead," omnipotent and omniscient will come to the believer and cause new life to come where spiritual death had before existed.

A few weeks ago we had some powerful winds sweep across southern California, approaching the 80 mile-an-hour range. Along with spreading the fires that were so destructive, other damage occurred too. In my front yard there's a tall tree, at least 40 feet tall, I'd say. The winds blew hard enough to cause some large branches to be broken off, branches with diameters of up to eight inches. That's a powerful wind! As I cut the branches into smaller segments, I tried to imagine taking that log and breaking it over my knee. It would have been impossible. What I could never have done, was accomplished by something I couldn't even see, the wind, often used as an illustration of the Holy Spirit!

Why should it be so hard to believe that God's Spirit can change and empower us to holy living? Paul's encouraging words were, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Romans 12:2. There's a license plate that I see around town on occasion that is "Rom 12 2." I expect that car belongs to someone who has embraced this principle. Paul told the believers at Philippi, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Philippians 2:5. God proposes to have our thoughts patterned after the way Jesus thought, to change the way we think. **When Jesus lives within us, He brings victory.**

When in India earlier this year, I attempted to illustrate this point in the following way. I said, "Let's suppose that you heard that Jesus Christ had come to this village. You wanted to meet Him, and so you

asked where He was. You are told, 'He's down at such and such a corner; He's the one smoking a cigarette.'" Jesus smoking a cigarette! That description would shock you, I hope. "Jesus would never smoke a cigarette", you say. You're right! Or, you're told, "Yes, He's in town. I just saw Him go into that R-rated movie." "Jesus going to a movie that is filled with violence and profanity? Preposterous!" You're right again!

Jesus wouldn't do those things, and if He's **in** your life and **in** your mind, and **in** your heart, He won't do those things **in** you either. I know this to be true because I used to go to movies, but God has changed my way of thinking and those things have no appeal to me anymore. I can't take any credit for the changes God has brought into my life just as Mary couldn't for her pregnancy. It was God's doing! The power of the Holy Spirit overshadowed her. And by the way, He has a lot more work to do in my life, but I believe He's able to do what He says!

One of the History courses my wife teaches at Palomar college is Renaissance and Reformation. Of course, in the context of that curriculum, Renaissance refers to the return of art and culture that occurred in the period about the 15th century. The Reformation refers to the movement sponsored by Luther and others in bringing people back to the Bible as the sourcebook of truth.

I've thought about this title being appropriate for us, students in the school of Christ. The word "disciple" means "learner." What does *renaissance* mean? *Renaissance* comes from a French background and means literally "to be born again." *Reformation* describes change. How apt for the Christian! We are learners, disciples in the college of Christ, and we're studying "Renaissance and Reformation" in a very personal way; re-birth and change. The Lord is our Instructor, and He is bringing new life and new habits into our experience. Re-birth without a change in habits and life-style is incomplete. Reformation without re-birth is impossible.

Like Mary, we may "ponder many things" in our hearts. There may be some things we don't understand about this experience, but if we allow God to open our eyes, there will be sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. In Mary's case, faith preceded fact, and so it will be for us. She first believed, and then it happened. There may still be things we don't comprehend, but faith grasps the invisible. It believes despite lack of precedent.

What exactly did Mary **do**? She said, "Yes." She allowed it to happen. She gave her permission. "Let it be." We have the promise of the Holy Spirit to remake us; I hope our response is the same as hers: "Let it be." We can't do it; we can't even understand it. But God has promised that through His power, new life can be ours. He can change us from the inside. He can retrain our thought patterns by His Spirit. He can transform our life patterns and goals so that the life of Jesus is seen in us. This is a miracle!

Why should it be considered an impossibility for God to remake us, since it was He who formed us in the beginning? If, through the Holy Spirit God could bring new life into Mary can He not also revive us spiritually?

But this is something unaccounted for according to human wisdom! This is something that will amaze and perplex your friends and acquaintances who witness the changes in your life. I'll tell you something else: It will amaze also the devil. This will be as mysterious and incomprehensible as was the pregnancy of Mary in Nazareth. But it will be undeniable and true nevertheless.

As a part of this process for Mary there came **travail** and **deliverance**. There are normally birth pains that accompany the coming of a baby, and there will be also in the life of the Christian. But also true will be the statement about Mary, "the days were completed for her to be delivered." Luke 2:6. What a sermon there is in that sentence! I recognize Doctor Luke is referring to her giving birth as "being delivered," and I'm making an application of that phrase to Jesus' return, but isn't it true that even today we use that word in both senses? Still today we speak of "labor and delivery". As a virtuous woman, representing the Church, one day "deliverance" will come!

There's only one way I know of to put yourself in the path of this great blessing, and that's to spend time daily in His Word and in prayer. His Spirit authored the Bible, and today He speaks through it to us.

Soon we will close the pages on the year 2007. The time and opportunities neglected therein will be forever out of reach. Before us stretches a new year. Why not covenant with the Lord to make Him your priority for this New Year? Why not covenant to spend time each day with Him so that this birth experience treasured by Mary will be yours also? By reading only three or four chapters a day, you will read the entire Bible in a year, and you will find a blessing!

By the way, here's a note on the tragic shooting of Washington Redskin's football player Sean Taylor. "If you wonder whether the bumper sticker about God 'allowing U-turns' for those heading in a wrong direction has any meaning, some events from the summer and autumn of 2007 might confirm it. A Seventh-day Adventist pastor was helping a young man in the public eye with such a change, only to have this work cut short by tragedy." Read the entire story at the following link. God bless you this week! Pastor John

(copy and paste this into your browser)
<http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=1533>