

“By faith . . .”

Mary, the mother of Jesus*

Sarah Joiner

BECAUSE OF your faith you are completely alone. Because of your faith your husband is going to divorce you. Because of your faith many people will think that you ought to face the death penalty. And yet, because of your faith, you are completely happy!

This is the picture of Mary which Luke 1 presents to us. She appears to be totally alone, isolated. When Gabriel announces to Mary that she will be the mother of the Son of God, there is no mention of any family or friends close at hand. I wonder whether she and her sister(s) were orphaned; the relative to whom she runs for sanctuary is Elisabeth, living over eighty miles away in “a Judean town in the hill country” (v. 39).

Mary is called “favoured one” (v. 28). She was chosen because she had four important credentials. Mary was

- descended from David, from whom the Messiah was promised to come
- a woman of great faith
- a “virgin”
- humble and of a contrite spirit.

God asked Mary to be the mother of His Son and to become part of His plan of salvation. She could easily have refused God’s request, but the astonishing quality of her faith is revealed in her humble response to Gabriel’s message: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (v. 38). This calibre of faith contrasts sharply with that of Moses and Jeremiah, who initially felt too inadequate to do what God asked of them. Mary was being asked to bear a child, as a virgin, without being married. In standing up for God and His power, she would become the object of much slander and ridicule.

Mary, living in Nazareth in despised and poor circumstances, is typical of the person whom God unexpectedly chooses to use. The only things on her résumé are her availability and willingness to serve. These characteristics are the most basic ones—and most vital—that a person can offer to God. How many of us refuse to take on jobs for the Lord, making an excuse of our personal inadequacies? If we take courage, we can be like Mary, who was willing to go on a terrifying spiritual journey simply because God had promised to go with her.

So where did Mary get her great faith from? What had shaped her into this humble young woman whom God favoured so highly? Her psalm of praise recorded in Luke 1:46-55 reveals the source of this faith, for it contains around 130 allusions to the Old Testament. Was she inspired to sing this song of praise to God? The record does not say. Perhaps Mary had been pondering these happy thoughts as she walked the long journey to Elisabeth’s home. On arrival, the feelings of intense joy and privilege gush out of her to form this beautiful psalm. At last Mary has someone to talk to who understands. And so the two women celebrate God’s steadfast love and purpose together. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God, and God’s Word was treasured in Mary’s heart, transforming her into a character that pleased God.

Notice the emphasis in Mary’s song on her sense of privilege that God should have stooped to choose her: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has looked with favour on the lowliness of His servant . . . He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly . . .” (vv. 46-48,52). Humility is the natural product of reflection about who God is. For Mary, her relationship with God was not a casual affair; she saw it rather as a huge honour, which called for a deep sense of respect. Both Mary and Elizabeth display a genuine reverence in the way they talk about God, reflecting that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7).

If this young woman from a poor, disadvantaged background can obey and serve God, so can we. Mary’s example of faith shouts out to believers of all times to ‘Let go and let God’; to let go of our fears, complacency and inadequacies and let God take us on the journey of faith; to be willing to risk all to please God. All that we need to do is to make ourselves available and to be willing to serve; God will do the rest. Mary’s instructions to the servants at the wedding in Cana are exactly what her example encourages us to do: “Do whatever [Jesus] tells you” (Jno. 2:5).

* Quotations from the NRSV.