

THE
MOM
GOD
CHOSE

MOTHERING
LIKE MARY

by
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I have paraphrased many of the Bible quotes in this book in order to give the Bible characters' words a conversational, relatable style. Any quote from an official translation is marked with a Bible reference in an endnote and is taken from the NIV 1984.

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INTRODUCTION

WHY MOTHER LIKE MARY?

Try to remember what you were like in junior high. Remember the things that mattered back then? Pepperoni pizza. Movies. Your hair. Sports. Things you couldn't change, like your nose or your kneecaps. The dreams deep inside you that were just beginning to lift their fragile green heads. The way boys were so annoying. The way adults seemed to exist in an alternate universe. The way you slept with your stuffed toys because they were your first and oldest friends and still made you feel safe.

Would that teenage you have been ready to be a mom? A mom who would take a permanent place in history? The mom of a child who would change the world?

Mary of Nazareth was just a girl when she became Jesus' mom. That was over two thousand years ago, and girls had to grow up faster back then. But still—why would we present-day mothers (most of us, I'm guessing, well past our 15th birthdays), with a Google-glut of resources at our fingertips, bother looking to a teenager from the Iron Age for parenting advice? Mary has nothing to tell us on how to throw a birthday party that won't break the bank. She is silent on the subjects of chores, Internet safety, and finicky eaters. In fact, Mary is not super chatty in the Bible. We only get glimpses of her parenting in the pages of Scripture. That's because the parts of the Bible that include Mary are . . . well . . . not really about Mary. Just as mothers with school-age children undergo an identity shift—they are now "Jack's mom" or "Jane's mom"—so too with Mary. For the purposes of God's salvation story, Mary is first and foremost "Jesus' mom."

On the other hand, the Bible tells us more about Mary of Nazareth than any other mom in its pages. Just as Jack and Jane owe their lives and health and education to the loving adults in their lives, so also Jesus did not exist in a vacuum. God very deliberately chose Mary to be the mother of his Son. She wasn't just a nice gal with a good head on her shoulders. Mary was a girl who believed the Bible to be the very Word of God. She knew God's promises (lots of them by heart). She pondered and lived by those promises, trusting that God knew best even when

her life got uncomfortable . . . which it did rather frequently. She was a girl who knew she needed a Savior from sin—all the bad things she thought and said and did—and who marveled that she would be the one to raise that Savior. Mary grew into a woman who followed Jesus, observing as he became ever less the child under her guidance and ever more the promised Savior who would purchase with his blood a peace between God and man.

So why would we care to mother like Mary? Because Mary had a treasure that we can have too. She had the Savior of the world in her home. She observed many signs that her child, God's Son, was both human and divine. She heard his voice. She watched his miracles. She witnessed his death. She saw him after his resurrection. When Jesus ascended into heaven, Mary clung to his promises to be with her always and to return one day. She treasured those words and events. They sustained her when her life got dicey. Mary loved Jesus as any mother loves her son, but it's what Mary saw in Jesus as her *Savior* that built hope inside her. Her hope was nothing like the knock-on-wood wishes of the world. Her hope was built on faith: that in Jesus, her life was sponged clean of sin and guilt and her death would lead to a heavenly home.

When we open our Bibles and let God's Word direct us, we grab hold of Mary's treasure. Then our Savior will find a place at our dinner tables and school desks. At our ball games. Beside our sickbeds and deathbeds. On our tongues. In our hearts. When we mother like Mary, with our eyes on Jesus, we will realize there is so much more we can give our children than *stuff*. We can give them a certain hope of an eternal home.

If you are new to the teachings and characters of the Bible, I'm happy that you're here! I hope this book might help you in your important search for spiritual answers and understanding. Perhaps some of you who read this book will be inspired to dig more deeply into the Bible. You won't regret your digging. You will unearth answers you have longed for all your life—answers found in the splendid, true story of Jesus: God's Son and our Savior.

If you are a lifelong Christian, welcome! This book is an opportunity to take a fresh look at a dear, familiar story and to treasure again and ponder anew the events of Jesus' life through Mary's eyes.

In this book, we'll follow Mary's parenting journey and her spiritual journey as recorded in the Bible. Each chapter closes with some ques-

tions to ponder and a prayer so that you can better personalize God's promises. We'll also drop in on a handful of contemporary mothers. They are moms at different stages of parenting and in different circumstances, but they each carry the same tool in their parenting tool belt: God's Word. They are moms who make mistakes and worry and sometimes argue. They are moms who pray for their kids and discipline them and make them wear socks when their own feet feel chilly. But most of all, they are mothers like Mary: moms who make sure that their Savior is never far from their line of sight.

And now let's head back in time, to Israel more than two thousand years ago.

PROLOGUE

THE WAY-PREPARER

LUKE 1:5-25

*Old priest stumbles, doubts.
God robs his tongue—a silent
sign that ends in song.*

The story of Mary begins with a prologue that takes place about 80 miles south of Mary's hometown of Nazareth, on the temple mount in Jerusalem. This is the center of Jewish worship life. Here in the temple, in the hushed and hazy interior of a room called the Holy Place, a devout old priest named Zechariah is all alone. He is poised to burn incense to God. He and his wife, Elizabeth—Mary's relative—are childless and long past their fertile years. But it seems they are not beyond praying for a child. In fact, this is a prayer that has run through their minds for decades. It has never been answered with a yes.

Suddenly, an angel appears. Zechariah is gripped with fear. But the angel Gabriel reassures him, "Do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard." Then Gabriel drops a bomb. Several, actually. "Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son. You are to give him the name John. He will be great in God's sight. Even from birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will bring people back to God and *get them ready for the Lord.*"

Gabriel's announcement must have made Zechariah's gray cells snap to attention. He had heard those words before . . . in an Old Testament prophecy. To understand the significance of this, we need to pause and take a closer look at prophecy in the Bible.

The Bible was written by about 40 authors over 16 centuries. Despite its many authors and the vast span of production time, the Bible is a book with a single overarching message: salvation from sin. Considering that I struggle to get four kids to agree on what they want for supper, that sort of harmony is nothing short of miraculous! But it was possible because "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."¹ In other words, God the Holy Spirit gave them the words to write. In Old Testament times (the thousands of years before Jesus'

birth), God often revealed his will to the world by speaking through prophets. These prophets received, relayed, and recorded what God revealed to them. Through his prophets, God told the world about sin and about a coming “Messiah” whose purpose would be to save the world from sin. (*Messiah* literally means “anointed one” and refers to the Old Testament practice of ceremonially anointing someone for a special office.) These prophecies came at fairly regular intervals, each one building on the last. But as the curtain rises on *this* story—the story of Mary of Nazareth—the last prophet to receive a direct word from God had been dead and gone for four hundred years. That prophet, Malachi, had left believers with a real cliff-hanger in the story of salvation: “I [God] will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come.”² In other words, the Messiah would be the Lord himself. And God would send a messenger to get people ready for him. This was a plot that just *had* to have a Part II.

And, suddenly, it did. Just when it seemed as if God’s people were waiting in vain for the sequel, the angel Gabriel shimmered onto the stage and delivered his lines to Zechariah: the first direct message from God after four centuries of divine silence. Any part of Gabriel’s announcement could have sent Zechariah into paroxysms. His son would be “great”? Filled with the Holy Spirit from birth? He would get people ready for the Lord? He would be a way-preparer like the one described by the ancient prophet Malachi?

You can almost hear the synapses firing in Zechariah’s brain. Could it be . . . after a millennia of waiting . . . that the promised *Messiah* was just around the corner?!

But then his engine stalls. There, in those holy surroundings, in the startling company of God’s angel, it seems that Zechariah can’t get past Gabriel’s first words: “*Your wife* will bear a son.” Zechariah is a believer, upright in God’s sight. But he is only human. He opens his mouth and inserts his foot.

“How can I be sure of this? I am old, and my wife is well along in years.”

If Zechariah were sitting in the clinic of his fertility consultant, his desire for proof would be reasonable. But he is questioning God, who works outside the bounds of reason, for whom nothing is impossible. Gabriel draws himself up and reminds Zechariah whose emissary he is. God’s words, the angel asserts, *will* come true at the proper time.

Zechariah's doubts are frozen on his lips. Under God's discipline, he returns home, unable to speak for the next nine months. As his wife, Elizabeth, swells with their first child, she speaks for them both: "The Lord has done this for me."³

There is a message here for both lifelong believers and those just beginning their search for truth. To those of us who should know better, who recognize God as all-powerful, all-knowing, all-just, and all-loving, this should prick our consciences. How easily we can relate to Zechariah's lapse of trust. "Yes, yes, Lord," we say. "It's all very well that you have destroyed sin, death, and the devil and won for me forgiveness and eternal life . . . but all that aside, what proof do I have that you will help me with the problem I am experiencing *now*—this belligerent child, this impossible boss, this bereavement, this bad news?"

To the Christian and to the seeker alike, God says, "Look what I did for Elizabeth. My Word is always true. Trust me. Test my Word and see for yourself." Let Gabriel's reminder to Zechariah be a reminder to all of us: whatever promises God has made in his Word *will* come true at their proper time.

Now let's join Mary six months hence in a no-account village called Nazareth. She is about to meet Gabriel too, and the news he delivers will forever change her life—and ours.

UNWRAPPING GOD'S FAVOR

LUKE 1:26-30

*Galilean girl—
bare of foot yet rich in faith—
the Lord is with you.*

PICTURING PALESTINE

Mary was a Jewish peasant girl from the province of Galilee in northern Palestine. Her “redneck” village, Nazareth, lay in a basin surrounded by white limestone hills that rose above the village like the edges of a shell. Its narrow streets, muddy in winter and dusty in summer, wove between a jumble of low stone houses with flat roofs. There were three main social levels in Mary’s world: rich landowners, subsistence farmers and tradesmen, and destitute beggars. Mary, like most in Nazareth, belonged to the middle group. These people were peasants who farmed small fields of grain, olives, or grapes. Mary would have been well-acquainted with her neighbors, especially the women with whom she worked and lived. We assume she was young, since she was not yet married. According to the customs of ancient Israel, girls were married right around puberty, between 13 and 15 years of age.

Daily life offered few luxuries and little leisure. Mary would have looked forward to kneeling on the packed-dirt floor of her home to listen to a family member retell the adventures of Bible heroes like Moses, Gideon, Joshua, and Esther—believers who overcame impossible odds because God was with them. As we will see, Mary knew by heart many Old Testament stories, promises, and prayers.

Most of Palestine at this time was suffering economic hardship due to the Roman Empire’s hefty taxes. As if that wasn’t bad enough, some 30 years earlier Caesar Augustus had appointed Herod the Great as king of Judea. King Herod imposed *additional* taxes to fund mammoth building campaigns. And over and above these government taxes, the Jews paid a temple tax and provided animals for annual sacrifices. Many peasant farmers were sunk in debt or in danger of losing their family’s land. No wonder the Jews resented the harsh Roman rule!



The unhappy political climate made many Jews long for the Messiah, a deliverer that God had promised to provide. In the Scriptures, God had said that this Messiah would come from the genealogical line of King David. But David's reign was now roughly a thousand years past, and where was the deliverer? Many Jews hoped he would burst into history and be a king like David: a great military leader who would oust Rome and restore glory to Israel. The Jews took great care to preserve their genealogies in order to keep an eye on David's descendants. Mary knew she was among the thousands who belonged to the royal line of King David. But she was no princess; she was no better off than a field mouse! What part could a girl like Mary play in God's rescue plan? Well, she would soon find out.

Six months after his angel ambassador visited Zechariah the priest, God was ready to announce the birth of the Messiah. But the deliverance God had in mind was not just for Israel, groaning under Roman oppression—it was for a world groaning under a burden of sin.

“GREETINGS, YOU WHO ARE HIGHLY FAVORED!”⁴

These were the angel Gabriel's first words to Mary as she went about her daily business in Nazareth. Imagine an unearthly emissary sent from God showing up as you sort the week's laundry! I expect most of us would be “gripped with fear” like old Zechariah. Our concern would swerve away from the soiled clothes to our sin-stained hearts.

“Wait—what?” you might be thinking as you read this, “*sin-stained?*” That’s a little extreme. My heart isn’t all that bad! Unlike some other moms, I always walk away from gossip. Err . . . mostly always. I avoid arguing . . . unless, of course, I’m right. I never yell at my kids. (In public.) Okay, I for sure never ever cheat on my taxes or leave a block of unwanted cheese on a random shelf in the grocery store!”

Yup. If we compare ourselves to those “other moms,” we look pretty good. But as you will see in the course of this book, angelic appearances tend to cause shockwaves of fear—not just because angels are supernatural beings but because they represent a holy God. And God isn’t impressed when we compare ourselves to those “other moms”—he wants us to compare ourselves to *him*. “Be *perfect*,” God says, “as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁵ Yikes. That’s when we realize we’re preschoolers with paintbrushes trying to mimic Michelangelo. On our own, we have zero hope of meeting God’s standards.

So it’s no wonder that Mary was “greatly troubled,”⁶ not only by the angel’s presence but also by his unconventional greeting. As she silently weighed its meaning, I doubt she patted her hair and wished she’d dressed better for the occasion. No, she was probably far more concerned with the state of her heart. What did it mean that she—a sinner like all of us—was “highly favored”?

Let’s think about that for a minute. Being a highly favored student or employee means your great work ethic has earned you the recognition of your superiors. But in God’s eyes, being highly favored is not like that at all—it’s not an honor that is earned. In Greek (the original language of the New Testament), *highly favored* means “one who has been shown grace” . . . in other words, shown God’s *undeserved* love and attention. Don’t picture a president pinning a medal on a war hero; picture a president slowing down his convoy so that he can pick up a hitchhiker! That act says nothing about the hitchhiker’s worth but certainly highlights the president’s mercy. Mary knew that she, like each and every believer, was a lowly hitchhiker scooped up by God out of sheer love and mercy. Considering God’s gift made her tremble with fear and wonder.

Do you have a heart like Mary’s? Do you tremble at God’s Word? Or do you, like me, sometimes find yourself reading his Word with yawns instead of awe or skimming over his word of favor instead of letting it

stop you in your tracks? For me, that's most likely to happen when I lose sight of my sinfulness. I start to think I'm *entitled* to a free ride—forgetting I was merely a hitchhiker on the highway to hell when God pulled over to rescue me.

Here's the thing: If God held us accountable for our “better-than-that-other-mom” behavior, there would be only one result. He would open the door of his salvation-wagon and boot us out. Instead, moved by love alone, God opens the door, pats the front seat, and says “get in.” He leans over to buckle us in with his promises. Then—can it be?—he hands us his presidential pardon: incredibly, we owe no penalty for our sins! With a smile, God explains, “My Son wore your name tag on the cross.”⁷ The perfection that God demands? He has supplied it through Jesus. It's like Michelangelo painting a masterpiece and then letting you sign his canvas and claim it as your own. *That's* how God's “high favor” works!

“THE LORD IS WITH YOU.”⁸

Let's not rush over Gabriel's declaration, “The Lord is with you”—Mary sure didn't! In Scripture, this phrase announced to God's people his presence, power, and protection. No matter how lopsided the odds, they had no need to fear or falter: God would tip the balance like an elephant on a teeter-totter. When Mary heard the angel say, “The Lord is with you,” I bet for a moment she forgot to breathe. She was standing in the sandals of Bible heroes like Moses, Joshua, and Gideon, who had each heard a similar promise when God had called them to their “impossible” missions.

Is it any surprise that Mary was troubled? What might God be about to ask of her? Mary didn't know it yet, but she would need a supersize portion of God's protection in the months to come. The words “the Lord is with you” would bell in her ears with heavenly reassurance as her waistline expanded (and with it the village gossip), as her labor pains forced her onto a stable floor, and as her family fled from a murderous king in the black of night.

“The Lord is with you.” God's promise to Mary is his promise to us. Mothering like Mary is not a solo act. In a very real way, God is with you and me. He listens keenly when we talk to him in prayer. He speaks patiently from the pages of the Bible: sharing stories of believers who struggled as we do and gently repeating his promises of love and forgiveness.

“But,” my heart sometimes cries, “if the Lord is with me, how come I feel so alone?” That great, gaping chasm of loneliness is something every human experiences. Jesus himself felt it on the cross when he cried out to his Father, “Why have you abandoned me?” In Jesus’ case, it was true. He was completely and utterly abandoned. The punishment he bore for our sins included his own Father turning his back on him. Because Jesus bore that abandonment, we never ever have to.

When my feelings overwhelm that truth, I’ll be honest—it’s usually because I’ve wandered too far from the cross. I’m so busy trying to *feel* God’s presence that I’m neglecting to spend time in his presence, in church or in private study. I’m waiting for him to whisper his answers into the wind when I pray instead of tuning in to the trumpet of his Word. What happens next is a hostile takeover: my feelings shove their way into the chief’s chair, and God’s promises only hover timidly in the shadows. When I get bad news, I wonder if God has forgotten me or doesn’t love me as much as I once thought. That’s when I need to dethrone my human reason and fickle feelings. They are meaningless if they contradict God’s promises. I may *feel* abandoned, alone, unloved, unworthy, but when God says in his Word “I am with you,” I must put all those feelings aside and simply trust that what God says is true.

“DO NOT BE AFRAID, MARY, YOU HAVE FOUND FAVOR WITH GOD.”⁹

As Mary grappled with the angel’s greeting, he repeated his assurance. Maybe it’s a small thing, but there in Nowhere Nazareth, without the benefit of any formal introduction, God through his angel messenger called Mary *by name*. God’s favor wasn’t only a universal desire for the welfare of the world, it was a personal intervention in the life of *Mary*.

When anxiety flops around in my head like a fish on a plank, I can wrap myself in this truth the way my five-year-old hides in the folds of her not-so-pink blankie: *God knows my name*. I can take God’s promises and fill in my own name. His love is not just for humanity in general, nor is it just for hero-moms in the Bible: God personally loves *me*.

Moms, it’s just as crucial for our children to know God’s personal love. Their earthly comforts will fade to gray, become thin and tear, and finally fail to deliver. Even our motherly arms will not always be able to encircle and protect them. They need us to teach them that God’s

love for them will never fade! The comfort it brings will only grow, the more tightly and frequently they wrap themselves in its folds.

MOTHERING LIKE MARY: LISA

In 2009, when Lisa was 39 years old, she elected to do a surgery that would prevent ovarian cancer—a disease that had taken her mother’s life seven years earlier. In the process, her surgeon discovered Lisa already had it.

In December 2014, after more than five years of ups and downs with her disease, Lisa was told that she had only months to live. I interviewed her in January 2015. Lisa died that July 6.

(Please read more of Lisa’s story in her blog: *Walking With Cancer, Walking With God.*)

Lisa, you are the mother of three young teenagers. How do you convey God’s love and presence to them as they watch you struggle with cancer?

It has been very hard for my children to see me sick for such a long time. The worst part was having to tell them that my time left here on earth is short. Whenever we get hard news, we let them each process it in their own way. We assure them that God hasn’t stopped loving any of us. Then we let them walk away and grieve. After a time, we bring them back and we answer any questions, and then we pray.

How has prayer been a blessing to you?

Prayer has been the glue that has kept us together, because our prayers are so personal. We cry out to God for help. We want the kids to know that our prayers don’t have to be perfect, just honest. Then we ask for reminders of God’s love and mercy. These reminders always come in unexpected ways: through a gift, a friend finally understanding, or someone unexpected reaching out to us.

How can mothers strive to be stirred by the magnitude of God’s love for us?

I think you have to look specifically for ways God helped you through the day. At the end of the day, you can say, “Oh, look what God did!” To help you remember those instances, you could write them down in a journal and pray about them later.

How do we pass on this kind of appreciation of God’s love to our children?

Show them how important God's Word is to you, otherwise it won't be important to them. There are countless ways you can bring up God in your daily interactions with your children. It can be as simple as telling your toddler to look at the beautiful blue sky God made for us or more complex, like when you're dealing with a teenager's life struggle by studying the Bible together.

It's also important to make church and Sunday school a priority in your life, every week. Don't let tiredness or cranky kids stop you from going. You are training them for their adult life. If weekly worship becomes a pattern, there's a good chance they will continue it in their adult lives.

— PONDER —

How was Mary "no better off than a field mouse"? What limitations do you have that make you ask, "What part could I possibly play in God's big plans?" Write a prayer putting those circumstances into God's hands.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being "barely"; 10 being "I'm so amazed by God's grace I can hardly concentrate on anything else"), how much do you tremble at God's Word and let it stop you in your tracks? What keeps your number from being higher? In what specific ways will you try to overcome those obstacles this month?

Have you ever felt like saying, "If the Lord is with me, how come I feel so alone?" When? What truth in this chapter most comforts you?

For the next five nights, write down five "Oh, look what God did!" moments from that day. Pray about all five of them when you wake up the next morning.

Imagine you only had a few more months to live. What would you change about your parenting? Your relationship with God?

— PRAY —

Lord, help me make time each day to unwrap and savor your favor. Amen.