

## **The Mythology of Mary**

### **Luke 1:28**

Mary, the mother of Jesus – what's your view of her? What sort of person was she? Where does she rank in your list of the most important women in the world? Why does she rank there? Why did God choose Mary to be the mother of Jesus?

### **The Roman Catholic View of Mary**

We have some friends who were missionaries in Spain. They worked with a very small evangelical church in the midst of a predominantly Catholic population. In one of their newsletters they wrote:

May is the month of Mary in Spain. [Town X] has had a month of celebrating, and we have seen once again how tradition is held onto very firmly. It is very hard to put into words, in a way that translates the things we see every day, but it is sad to see how the truth of the gospel has been distorted, and how passionately blind people seem to be. Statues paraded, worshipped unapologetically, Mary given the place that is rightfully that of God. The point that is particularly sad is, for those in this culture who turn their back on this form of religion, they believe they are rejecting Christianity, and yet have never been confronted with the true Christ. What can we say except that it is very, very sad?

Their letters often expressed the sadness they felt at what they saw around them. The so-called Christianity that surrounded them seemed to have very little to do with the Bible – even though it was sometimes accompanied by miracles.

For Catholics, Mary's an important figure. Let me run through fairly quickly five things they've taught about Mary at various times. And, at the same time, let's think about why they've come to these conclusions and taught these things. What are their reasons for teaching these things we don't think are found in the Bible.

**First**, they say Mary perpetually remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus. According to them, the birth of Jesus didn't destroy her virginity – or the evidence of it. Nor, they say, did she engage in sexual intercourse with Joseph after the birth of Jesus, even though they were now married. They say the marriage of Joseph and Mary was totally celibate for the rest of their days.

Why do they say that? One writer puts it this way:

It cannot with decency be imagined that the most holy vessel which was once consecrated to be a receptacle of the Deity should be afterwards desecrated and profaned by human usage.

refer Boettner, *Roman Catholics*, 158

In other words, they think that because Mary's body was put to such a holy use as bearing the incarnate Son of God it couldn't – or perhaps shouldn't – be used for less holy things that are part of everyday human life. It'd be like taking a bowl consecrated to hold the sacrificial blood and filling it with water to wash your car.

**Secondly**, they teach that Mary herself was perfectly sinless throughout her life. From the time of her birth to the time of her death, she didn't sin once. She was a totally pure vessel for the Son of God. This view seems to have developed and become reasonably widespread during the Middle Ages.

Why do they say that? Two main reasons:

- First: it wasn't considered proper for the sinless Son of God to come into contact with sin in the vessel (namely, Mary's body) which brought Him into the world.
- Second: it wasn't considered proper for a sinful woman to have the honour of bearing in her body the sinless Son of God. The woman to whom this honour was given had to be especially holy.

**Thirdly**, just as God intervened in the conception of Jesus within Mary's womb, so Mary herself was immaculately conceived (to use the technical term). Her own conception was said to be the result of the special intervention of God in her mother's womb. This isn't necessarily in the sense that she also was conceived without sexual intercourse, but in the sense she was purified at the point of her conception such that she was without the taint of original sin.

There was some argument about this within the church for several hundred years. In 1854 Pope Pius IX settled it with a papal bull:

We declare, pronounce and define that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, by the singular grace of privilege of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, and that this doctrine was revealed by God, and therefore must be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.

Why do they say that? It's similar to the last one. If Mary was to remain sinless throughout her life, then it

seemed necessary she be born without sin. And if, unlike the rest of us normal mortals, she was to be born sinless, then she needed to be conceived in a special way so the effects of original sin were removed from her.

**Fourthly**, Roman Catholics teach the bodily assumption of Mary. That is, just as Jesus was taken into heaven without having His body buried in the ground, so they say Mary was taken into heaven in a similar way. She was taken, body and soul, straight to heaven. This came from a fourth century legend which gained popularity during the early Middle Ages.

I haven't read directly about the reasoning behind this particular belief – and so I can only speculate. I suspect it's tied up with Mary's sinlessness. If Mary was totally holy and pure and without sin, then she didn't deserve to die – since death's the penalty for sin. Since she's no longer present on earth, it would seem logical she must have been translated to heaven in some manner not involving the intervention of physical death.

**Fifthly**, Mary's able to mediate between people and God. In the Middle Ages, there was a tendency to see Jesus as stern and unapproachable. People were told to approach Jesus through the much more sympathetic Mary. As an earthly mother often has special influence over her son, so Mary's said to have special persuasive powers when it comes to her Son, Jesus. If, in prayer, we ask Jesus for something and seemingly fail to receive it – then, we should try going through Mary. As His mother, perhaps she'll find some way of twisting His arm so He gives us what we want. This led to the practice of praying to Mary in her own right.

There then, briefly, are five things Roman Catholics teach about the person of Mary. I must emphasise I've only touched on each one briefly by way of general introduction – for, in themselves, they aren't our main focus this morning.

I hope you can see, however, that there is some logic behind what they've taught. It's not that they've simply made these things up to be difficult. There's a certain logic to what they say.

- Jesus is the pure Son of God.
- Mary, as the mother of Jesus, is the one who carried the pure Son of God in her womb.
- If Mary herself were not pure, then the pure Son of God would come into contact with impurity before He's born.
- If that were the case, there'd be the distinct danger that Jesus Himself wouldn't be born pure.

It is wrong logic – but there's a certain logical flow to their argument.

That, then, is something of the Roman Catholic view of Mary. They have a fairly high view of her as a person, don't they? She seems to be at the top of their list of the most important women who've ever lived. I wonder how they'd answer the question: Why did God choose Mary to be the mother of Jesus?

### **The Popular View of Mary**

But let's not ask them the question – since they aren't here. Let's ask ourselves instead. Why did God choose Mary to be the mother of Jesus? What's your gut reaction to such a question?

Some twenty years ago, I came across the following quote from a man with the unusual surname of Smith. I haven't kept a record of his first name, and I don't know now where I got the quote from. He says this:

In a word, so far as Mary is portrayed to us in Scripture, she is, as we should have expected, the most tender, the most faithful, humble, patient and loving of women ...

Quite apart from Smith's poor mathematics – is that why God chose Mary? Was it because she supposedly had all those wonderful qualities? Smith seems to think so, for he says this is *as we should have expected*. Why? Why should we have expected her to be those sorts of things? What's the underlying theology that leads someone to expect her to be those sorts of things?

Why did God choose Mary to be the mother of Jesus? What do you really think deep down? Was it because she was sinless? The Roman Catholics seem to imply that. We Protestants disagree. We believe Mary was a sinner like the rest of us. We believe the Bible teaches Jesus is the only human who's lived without sin. We believe that, like us, Mary needed someone to save her from her sin. If that were not the case, then Jesus' death on the cross would be unnecessary. So we don't think she was chosen because she was sinless.

Maybe it was because she was better than others. Did God choose her because she was better than the other young girls around at the time? Was it because when God scanned all history he found her to be the best young lady who ever lived? Was it because she was the most pious and most godly woman who ever lived? Isn't that

the direction in which Mr Smith points us?

Or perhaps that's too strong for your liking. Maybe it wasn't because she was the *most* godly – maybe it's that she's up there with the best of them. Or maybe it's she's more godly than the average Jewish young lady of the time.

Why did God choose Mary to be the mother of Jesus? Was it because God knew she'd be such a good mother – even the perfect mother:

- That she'd never hit her child in anger?
- That she'd never lose her patience with Him and raise her voice?
- That she'd never resort to emotional blackmail to get Him to do what she wanted?
- That she'd provide three good meals a day so the Son of God was never malnourished?
- That she'd give Jesus all the emotional support so He'd grow up to be a well-adjusted adult?

Were these the reasons God chose Mary?

I suspect there are many people around – many Christian people – who deep down think God chose Mary because Mary deserved it in one way or another. We have this gut feeling that somehow Mary was worthy of this honour – or, at least, more worthy than others who could have been chosen at the time. We know no one could be *completely* worthy. After all, what human woman could fully deserve the honour of bearing the incarnate Son of God in her womb? Yet, I suspect there remains within us that which wants to say Mary was better qualified than the other possible candidates – that there was something in her that resulted in her winning the competition.

Why did God choose Mary to be the mother of Jesus? What's the text of the Bible say? Luke 1:28.

*The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."*

Luke 1:30

*But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You are to be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus. ..."*

At the risk of labouring the point, note some of the things the angel didn't say. The angel did not say:

- Greetings, you sinless woman.
- Greetings, you devout and holy woman.
- Greetings, you who are up-to-date with your sacrifices at the temple.
- Greetings, you who've achieved the required quota of good deeds for the month.
- Greetings, you who deserve to have the Lord look kindly on you.

The angel says: *Greetings, you who are highly favoured. Greetings, you who have been given grace.*

Why did God choose Mary? She had some advantages.

- She was a woman, and women seem to have certain advantages over men when it comes to giving birth to children – although I guess God could have overcome those if He wanted to.
- She wasn't a prostitute. It'd be rather difficult to establish the credibility of the virgin conception if Mary was a prostitute.
- Similarly, she wasn't married. Even then, people simply assumed she and Joseph got in early before

the actual wedding day.

- She was engaged and soon to be married. That had the advantage of having a father on the scene at the time of the birth, but not the conception.
- She was of the line of King David. That was important for the fulfilment of the prophecies and promises God made in the Old Testament.

But ultimately, God's choice of Mary is an act of His sovereign grace. It's not that God was forced to choose her because she somehow deserved it over other women.

We complain about the mythology of the Roman Catholics in relation to Mary – and rightly so. The things they say about Mary aren't taught by the Bible and many of them undermine things that are taught by the Bible and undermine the message of the gospel itself. Yet, are we any better? Do we have our own underlying mythology about Mary that has the same or a similar underlying basis?

Now, please don't get me wrong at this point. I don't want to put Mary down. I'm not saying that Mary:

- was an openly blatant sinner
- was the most sinful person in Nazareth
- wasn't a devout and godly woman

What I am saying is the Bible doesn't place the emphasis on those things in giving the reason as to why God chose her for this task. God's choice was a result of His own graciousness. The Bible's focus is on the Child who was born – more than the vessel used to give birth.

### **The Gift of Christmas**

Why have I spent so much time on this? Because it's an issue that goes to the heart of Christmas. Christmas is all

about God's free gift – God's favour, God's grace – to us. The same issue's at the heart of it.

- It isn't that God had to wait until the world cleaned up its act a bit, and then He acted by sending His Son into it.
- It isn't that God had to wait until Israel cleaned up her act, and then responded by sending His Son.
- It isn't that God had to wait until He could find an especially good and holy woman to be a suitable vessel for bearing His Son.

Indeed, the Bible tells us it was just the opposite. God acted at a time when the world was in opposition to Him. Have a look at Romans 5:6

*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ... God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ... For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!*

...

That passage speaks about Jesus' death – but His birth, life, death and resurrection are all part of the one package. Jesus was born into a world that:

- was in rebellion against God
- was as wicked as always
- was full of God's enemies
- didn't deserve to have Him come

That's the whole point of the Christmas story – it's God acting to save people who couldn't save themselves and didn't deserve to be saved.

That's the nature of the message of the Bible. It's a

message of good news. A message:

- of forgiveness by God
- of being saved by God
- of having God's judgment against us turned aside
- of being reconciled to God
- of being adopted into God's family
- of spending forever in the presence of God

All as a result of God's undeserved gift – and the emphasis is very much on *undeserved*.

But we keep wanting to argue that somehow we deserve this gift:

- We're not as bad as the next guy
- We live a pretty good sort of life
- We try to keep most of the 10 commandments
- We try to help people
- Mary deserved to be the mother of Jesus

It won't work. That isn't the way God's done it.

God shows the magnificence of His love by pouring it out on people who don't deserve it – people exactly like us. We deserve His judgment rather than His grace and love. Yet, instead of giving us judgment, He freely gives us eternal life. Let's continue to rejoice in His generosity towards us.