

WHO, ME?



MARY

SURPRISED BY GOD

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WHO, ME?

Each of us has a story to tell, a journey of faith that began at God's invitation and will continue throughout eternity. In the *Who, Me?* series you'll be drawn into the life of one person in Scripture by hearing their ancient story and exploring it in deeper ways. As you immerse yourselves in Mary's life, your group will see how God was at work and is still at work in similar ways in our lives today. You'll use essential questions to find points of connection between your life and Mary's, so that you can experience God's grace more fully and grow as a follower of Christ.

GETTING STARTED

Mary: Surprised by God, and all of the Bible studies in the *Who Me?* series, are designed to be easy to use in large or small group settings for Bible study, youth group, church school, or parachurch ministry. Aside from a few supplies, you'll find everything you need on one disc, including an outline of the essential questions for the study, all of the leader's materials with Bible backgrounds, and printable pages for use within your group. Simply make as many copies of the leader and participant materials as you need.

STRUCTURE

Each Bible study in this series follows the same pattern:

- **The Study Outline:** This outline offers a quick look at the questions you'll be exploring in each session.
- **Scripture, Materials, and Bible Background:** This section helps leaders prepare. We hope leaders will spend time prayerfully reading the Bible passage and Bible background in advance, and gathering or printing the materials listed for the session.
- **Connecting:** This section offers ideas for getting started as your group arrives.
- **Rewind:** After session 1, the short Rewind section will recap where you've been so far in the study. It's also an opportunity for the group to share ways they saw themes from the previous session emerge in their lives throughout the week.
- **Hearing the Story:** In this step a portion of the Bible story or passage is shared by the leader or someone in the group, and a short discussion follows.
- **Entering the Story:** This step helps you engage the story a second time in creative and imaginative ways that draw out your questions and open you up to the Spirit's nudging and to new insights about the story.
- **Living the Story and In My Life:** Here the rubber meets the road, usually through a time of discussion and reflection. Each person has the chance to consider how God is speaking to them and seeking to shape them through this story.
- **Closing prayer:** Depending on the timeframe you are working with, you may want to use this time for a brief prayer or expand it to include the requests of the group.
- **Additional Ideas:** Each session will include at least two additional ideas for you to use along with or in place of ideas that were offered in the session. You know your group best, so always read these additional options and build a session that will work best for you.

This study is intended to be a tool for you, so feel free to tweak and change any part of it to fit your unique ministry setting!



MARY OUTLINE

SESSION ONE: THE SONG OF MARY p. 6

Essential Questions: When have you experienced God's protection, mercy, blessing, and promises in your life? What qualities do you have that you think God could use for a greater purpose? How might God be calling you to do something wonderful with the gifts he has given you? What would be the scariest thing God could ask you to do for him?

SESSION TWO: NATIVITY p. 16

Essential Questions: Why do you think we want to picture the nativity scene as a calm and peaceful event? What can we learn about Mary by thinking about realistic details of the nativity? What can we learn about God by thinking of these realistic details? What emotions or characteristics of Mary during her time in Bethlehem and Jerusalem can we all identify with?

SESSION THREE: WEDDING, WATER, WINE p. 24

Essential Questions: What do you find difficult about faith? When is it hard to trust and have faith that God will do what he says? Do you think Mary ever doubted? Does that change your opinion about her? Why do you think some people need signs to believe in God?

SESSION FOUR: DISCIPLE p. 32

Essential Questions: What must Mary have been feeling as she watched her son die on the cross? Why don't we think of someone like Mary when we hear the word disciple? Which of Mary's characteristics do you think are the easiest to exemplify in your own life? Which of the characteristics are the hardest? How can you make sure that all people feel welcomed to church and welcome to be a disciple of Jesus?



SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:26-56

MATERIALS

- Bibles or printouts of Luke 1 (p. 11), one per person
- Writing utensil for each person
- Printouts of the Song of Mary handout, one per small group
- Printouts of the In My Life page for each participant (p. 15), optional

BIBLE BACKGROUND

“God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.” As so often happens in the Bible, when God is on the move, strange things happen. In the Old Testament many other important births began in the impossibility of barrenness—Sarah, Rachel, Samson’s mother, and Hannah all faced this hopelessness only to see God intervene to restore fertility. It’s as though God wants to emphasize that he alone can accomplish salvation. But, when it comes to Mary, it’s not just barrenness, but virginity that forms the impossibility.

Many scholars have noted that it’s very likely that Mary was not a mature young woman, but rather a young teenager in our culture. Most women were betrothed by the time they were fourteen years old or so, and married soon after. Imagine this teen girl, then, suddenly accosted by an angel, Gabriel no less, God’s chief messenger.

“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Now imagine this young girl being told that she is “highly favored,” and that the Lord is with her. (Not “the Lord be with you,” a prayer, but the Lord is with you, a fact.)

Of course, “Mary was greatly troubled,” and must have wondered, “what’s going on here?” Gabriel then proceeds to offer the explanation. First, of course, it’s “Do not be afraid.” It seems that every time the Lord really scares us, we are then told not to be afraid.

Then the angel repeats that Mary has found favor with God. We need to remember that God did not choose Mary at random, as though anyone would do; rather, God has carefully selected her, examined her heart and soul, and found her worthy of being the mother of the Messiah, God's own Son. This is just one of the reasons why we honor her.

The next words to come from the angel must have jolted her: "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus." One wonders whether she even heard the rest of the message after these startling words. But what a message it is! This child will be "great," "Son of the Most High," and reign on David's throne forever. Mary, who would certainly have been aware of the promised Messiah from the Davidic line, would have recognized the weight of these words.

But her question is simple: "How? I'm a virgin." It's not just propriety she's asking about but gynecology. She must have sensed that this conception would not take place in the usual way. Gabriel's answer is mysterious: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." If this is to be the "Son of God," then God must in some sense be the father. In these words is contained the mystery of Christ's humanity and divinity. He is fully human, a son of Mary, growing in her womb, cells built with her DNA. He is also the "Son of God." That is, this child, while 100 percent human and made of human stuff, is at the same time 100 percent divine and made of divine stuff. Explaining this is hard and many have found they can't find the right words. But it is all part of the mystery of faith and it is what we confess and believe.

In closing, the angel adds that even Mary's old and barren cousin Elizabeth is now pregnant too (as though that is anything like Mary's virgin-born child). But the last message from Gabriel is important: "For no word from God will ever fail." Or, as in the older translation, "Nothing is impossible with God." (See Genesis 18:14.)

Mary's response should be enshrined in every church building: "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled" (or, "be it done to me according to your word"). While God had chosen Mary, he was not about to order her to go along. God wanted her "yes" to his astounding plan. God was looking for a partner, not a puppet. In her acquiescence, Mary becomes the first disciple. Her "yes" becomes the model for all of us to respond to God's call. Her "yes" becomes the dawn of salvation for the world.

Mary then goes down to meet her cousin, who she had just learned was also miraculously pregnant. Who else could she talk to who would really understand the miracle that God had provided? We see that understanding manifested in Elizabeth's wonderful greeting in Luke 1:42. "In a loud voice" she acknowledges Mary's greatness, and the greatness of the child in her womb. Even the unborn John the Baptist leaps in the womb at the approach of the one whom he would point to. Elizabeth blesses Mary not just for her marvelous pregnancy, but for her faith—"Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

Mary breaks into song, using the familiar cadences of the psalm poetry of the Jews. Many have noted the similarity of the themes of Mary's Song and the "song" of Hannah (1 Samuel 2: 1-10), especially the way in which the Lord reverses human hierarchies. "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble" (v. 52). Finally, in her song, Mary acknowledges that in this great moment, God is honoring the covenant he made with Abraham long ago, that through him and his descendants, the whole world would be blessed.

CONNECTING (VARIED)

As your group arrives, encourage everyone to share stories from their week. Do this as people are coming in and getting settled. If you like, provide snacks for people to munch on while they listen. Don't put any pressure on the group to get philosophical about their stories. But if the timing feels right, encourage some of them to share stories about where and how they've seen God working in their lives over the past week. Wrap up this time by opening in prayer.

REWIND (5 MINUTES)

In future sessions this step will give you time to review where you've been in the Mary story. For this first session, introduce the Mary series by saying a few words about why you chose this study and why Jesus' mother Mary is so important. Review/explain the format to your group: each week you'll start by talking a little about what is happening in your own lives. Then you'll spend a few minutes reviewing what you've already discussed before hearing the next portion of the story and exploring it together in a variety of interactive ways. Invite the group members to look for similarities between their own lives and the life of Mary.

HEARING THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

For this study on Mary, we want to encourage you to have the females in your group read the Scripture passages. Mary was an important woman of the Bible. We hear a lot about men in the Bible and a lot from men about the Bible. For this session, we think it is especially important to honor women's voices and hear Mary's story from female mouths.

READ LUKE 1:26-56

When you're finished sharing the story, ask everyone to open their Bibles to Luke 1, or hand out the printout of Luke 1.

Explain to your group that this story takes place in a time and place where women were not treated very well. They were thought of more as property than people. They had very few rights and their actions were highly scrutinized, particularly when it came to marriage and sex.

Lead a short discussion, using all or some of the following questions:

- How do you think Mary must have felt hearing this news from the angel?
- What might Mary have been concerned about? (Think particularly about her culture and people's reactions.)
- Why do you think God chose Mary to do this amazing thing? What message might he have been trying to send? (God could have chosen a woman of higher status, or one who was not a virgin, or one who had more money/resources.)
- Review Mary's response together. How do her feelings and reactions change over the course of the story?
- How does Elizabeth add to the story? Why might her role be important?

WHO, ME? IN MY LIFE



When have you experienced God's protection, mercy, blessings, promises in your life?

Do you identify with Mary in this story? How?

What qualities do you have that you think God could use for a greater purpose? How might God be calling you to do something wonderful with the gifts he has given you?

What scares you about God's calling? What would be the scariest thing God could ask you to do for him? Why? What would you do?