



Why Do a Study Guide?

It is not a common thing to do a weekly study guide along with a sermon series. The reasoning is pretty simple. Sermons are not meant to be simply lectures and presentations. They are part of an ongoing dialogue between Christ and the church through the medium of the Scriptures. The 30-40 minutes we spend listening to a sermon on Sunday are meant to be a bridge, connecting the eternal word and will of God with our fleeting days. This study guide is meant to extend that conversation beyond the worship gathering.

The material in the guide are only tangentially connected to the Sunday sermons. This is on purpose. There is always a much bigger conversation to be had. I hope you will receive the guide in the spirit of discussion and engagement.

Format

Each week has two components. The first is a brief reflection on a particular aspect of Mary, drawn from the Scriptures. Read this and consider the passages listed. It is not meant to be a deep theological inquiry, but rather a conversation starter.

The second component is a series of daily discussion questions. These simple questions are meant to be thought-provoking, bringing some of the ideas from the reflection into practical scope. I encourage you to do more than just give simple answers and move on. Have a discussion with someone—your family or a friend—about the question of the day. What thoughts does the question prompt? Where would you go from where it takes you?

- Erik D.

1 - The Virgin

When Matthew composed his gospel, he chose to translate the Hebrew word *‘almah* in Isaiah 7:14, which just means young woman with the Greek word *parthenos*, meaning virgin. Luke is more explicit, and has Mary declare to the angel that she has never been with a man sexually (Lk 1:34). We tend to take Mary’s virginity for granted, but it was an absurd notion in Second Temple Judaism. Paul’s assertion that Jesus was God’s son, “born of a woman” (Gal 4:4) was scandalous. Paul asserts that Jesus was *born* the Son, without an earthly father. His authority therefore supersedes the authority of any rabbi, who would have had to prove his father’s lineage to be accepted.

All of this is theologically rich and helps us understand the “big picture” of Jesus’s birth, but let’s pause and consider the tremendous burden God was placing upon Mary by choosing her to carry Jesus. He was asking a young woman to completely conform her life to His purposes. From this moment on, Mary’s life would be defined by her relationship to her firstborn son.

Mary may have been as young as twelve or thirteen when she was betrothed to Joseph, and yet the angel describes her as “full of grace” (*karitoō*). She is described in terms reserved for the greatest of the “spiritual heroes” of Scripture (Lk 1:29, 30). The conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel echoes the commissioning of royal or imperial steward (Lk 1:26–38). God placed in her body the hope of the world, knowing that she was capable and faithful. She was being appointed to a purpose beyond anything an earthly empire could ever accomplish, the birth of salvation and the fulfillment of God’s eternal covenant with David (Gen 49:9–12; 2 Sam 7:4–17; Ps 89:1–4; Isa 11:1–5).

It would have taken a formidable young woman to carry an illegitimate child to term with humility, without lashing out in anger when the gossip that swirled around her family reached her ears. What Old Testament prophet could have endured the crushing responsibility she carried when she swaddled the Son of God, held him close to her chest in the night and sang the songs of Moses and David as lullabies?

Daily Discussion Questions

Monday

Why do you think Jesus was born of a virgin? How important is this idea to your perception of Jesus?

Tuesday

What relationship exists between *grace* and *humility*? How did being “full of grace” prepare Mary for the calling of motherhood?

Wednesday

The Christian life would be a lot easier if there was an angel telling us what was coming next. For Mary, however, she has only the announcement. She has to figure everything else out on her own. How do you find your path between knowing what God has for you to do and how you will actually do it?

Thursday

Although our focus is on Mary, what character traits do you see in Joseph that prepared him to be a partner with her in the work of raising Jesus?

Friday

Mary's gifts matched the responsibilities of being Jesus's mother, but she could not have known that was what she was prepared for. How often do you find that God has prepared you for something you could have never seen yourself doing?

2 - His Mother

Over twenty times in the gospels, Mary is referred to as "his mother." Jesus was her oldest son, and the only one conceived supernaturally. There is no wonder why she is referred to this way. When Matthew described the visit of the magi, he wrote "they see the child with Mary his mother" (Mt 2:11). She is called "mother" far more often than her name is used.

While Joseph worked to provide for their growing family, Mary (who was undoubtedly literate) would have been teaching Jesus and his half-siblings the Torah, the Prophets. Mary would have held his hand as they walked to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who sat with the child Jesus and his cousin John, explaining their God's purpose for them. You have to wonder if when as an adult Jesus quoted the Hebrew Scriptures, if it was Mary's voice he heard reciting them to him. Joseph disappears by the time Jesus was an adult (Lk 2:41-52). Only "the mother of our Lord" (Lk 1:43) remained, and eventually her devotion to her son Jesus would find her abandoned by her other children, standing alone at the foot of the cross (John 19:26-27).

What we often miss is how important Mary was to early church. Mary was not simply an innocent vessel for Jesus's physical incarnation. She was the hand that guided Jesus, prepared him for the human struggles. She modeled prayer for him, lived a life of service in grace. Jesus must have interacted with her more often than the gospels record. And for the first believers, she must have been quite influential.

Luke, who spent more time on Mary than Matthew does, reminded his readers that she was also among those who gathered in the upper room after Jesus's' ascension (Acts 1:14). While she was mother to Jesus, was Mary also mother to the apostles who had left so much behind when they identified with Jesus? Young men like John, who was probably a teenager at the time, would have looked up to her. The entire testimony of her actions over the course of decades is merely her faithful presence. She was completely content to be nothing more than the mother of Jesus.

In this, Mary was the embodiment of what it means to be a follower of Christ, and that is—in my imagination anyway—why Luke chose to include her in Acts and speak so highly of her in his gospel. She modeled the life of the believer in community. She had every reason to claim priority, to expect special treatment. Instead, she was simply "his mother" and remained in the shadow of Jesus's

magnificence. Helping, caring, and present but content to simply be what God had called her to do and see it through to the end.

Daily Discussion Questions

Monday

Do you have someone who is a “Mary” to you? A teacher, mentor, caregiver who influenced the way you think, pray, believe? Why did that person impact you so much?

Tuesday

As you grow as a believer, how can you be a “Mary” to others? What aspects of your spiritual walk would you be comfortable passing on to the next generation?

Wednesday

Can you describe a time when your *presence* was more important than your words or your actions?

Thursday

Mary began her journey very differently than how she ended it. How has your Christian faith changed over the years? What factors have led to these changes?

Friday

Do you think Mary’s devotion to Jesus was primarily because she was his mother? Was there something else?

3 - Her Voice

How many of Mary’s words do you know? She does not speak in Matthew or Mark. In Luke’s gospel, she speaks three times. First, Mary has a conversation with the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26–38). Then she sings a rather brief song (Luke 1:46–56). The final time we read her words is when she finds Jesus after their visit to Jerusalem and asks, “Son, why have you treated us so?” (Luke 2:41–51). Finally, she speaks once John’s gospel, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5).

That's it. Those are the only times we ever read something Mary said. Of course, she said more over her lifetime. As the mother of at least five sons and two daughters, she certainly would have had reason to speak quite a bit. One can imagine her as an older woman, long after Jesus's resurrection. She would have been called upon to explain how she was made pregnant by the Holy Spirit, to recount what it was like to have the Christ in her home as a child, to tell the story of his first journey to the temple, the songs of the angels, the brutality of his crucifixion. She would have had a unique point of view on all of this.

We do not get her point of view, not directly anyway. It is interesting to think that Mary's words impacted New Testament authors. Two of them, James and Jude, were likely her sons and a third, John, cared for her after Jesus's crucifixion. We would expect to see a direct impact with them, and you cannot wonder if James's words about the widow (James 1:27) or John's interest in the mediating women in his gospel (the Samaritan woman, the woman taken in adultery, Pilate's wife, etc.) was not born out of spending time with Mary. And what about Luke and Paul? Both appear to have had strong female figures in their lives, but

It is entirely possible that Luke offers us a vision of Jesus at least partially colored by the perspective of the many women he speaks highly of in his gospel, and he speaks of none as highly as Mary. Luke was relying on second hand information., and he was a careful researcher. Could at least some of his gospel be informed by the way Mary told the stories to Luke? It is something to ponder.

Daily Discussion Questions

Monday

When you envision the biblical authors, how do you see them? If there really is some of Mary's voice preserved in Luke's gospel, how does that affect how you might read the text?

Tuesday

Does it matter if the words credited to Mary are real or not? If Luke made up the song he says she sang, how would that affect your belief in Scripture?

Wednesday

Although at least two of Jesus's brothers eventually came to faith in him, John records that they did not believe in Jesus (John 7:5). How do you think that affected Mary, knowing that her own children could not see Jesus for who he was?

Thursday

Given a choice, would you rather be remembered for what you say or what you do? Why?

Friday

Imagine being part of the early church, being able to sit in a worship gathering with Mary. What question would you ask her?

4 - A Disciple

In the Protestant and free church traditions, we tend to downplay the medieval description of Mary still found in many liturgical traditions like Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. This traditional view emphasizes Mary to the point at which she became a caricature. They go so far as to say that Mary was virgin born herself, and that she did not die but was carried to heaven like Elijah.

Unfortunately, this false elevation has resulted in a backlash against Mary. IN the modern church, Mary is often treated as someone ordinary and even unexceptional. This does a great disservice to this woman of faith.

It is important to remember that Mary was not just some vessel for transporting Jesus, nor is she some Queen of Heaven. Mary was, for the vast majority of his time on earth, simply a faithful woman and a disciple of Jesus. With the exception of the announcement of divine conception, Mary's life was largely like yours or mine. She would have struggled with sin, had doubts and fears. She stumbled and she celebrated. She would had arguments with Joseph, sometimes disciplined her children too little or too much, woken up tired and cranky. She would have dealt with menopause, a sore back, not wanting to drag herself to synagogue.

She was like me, like you. And like you, she *chose* to follow Jesus. She did. And it required that she sometimes would wait outside while he was teaching or had to comply with his often mysterious ways. She must have doubted him at times. She also had to endure long separations, knowledge of his eternal purposes.

We never get any indication that Mary struggled with ego due to her favored position. Despite being the woman who carried Jesus, she could still be found under the preaching of the Scriptures and the leadership of the apostles (Acts 1:14). In many ways, this humility may be the most extraordinary thing about Mary. She embodies the knowledge of playing your part in God's plan and faithfulness in the midst of everything.

Daily Discussion Questions

Monday

What does it mean to you to be a disciple or follower of Jesus? How would you define it?

Tuesday

Why do you think the medieval church made such a big deal about Mary, elevating her almost to the level of God? Are there other people or things that we do this to today?

Wednesday

Understanding the biblical depiction of Mary requires a balanced view and careful consideration of what we have been taught both in the church and popular culture. Are there other areas of our faith that require balance and consideration? If so, what areas and how do you balance the issue?

Thursday

Just as Mary embodied the knowledge of playing her part in God's plan, do you currently see yourself as faithfully playing your part? How do you see yourself in the plan?

Friday

Be honest. When you thought of the Christmas story before beginning this study, how important was Mary in the telling? How much did you really consider her as a person, when compared to the multimedia light show of the angels and the extraordinary journeys of the magi? And yet, she is the only person who appears at both the manger and the cross.