

WHEN ONLY
Faith
REMAINS

FINDING YOURSELF *in the*
Life of Mary,
the MOTHER of JESUS



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REDEMPTION 
P R E S S

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INTRODUCTION

Pondering Sacred Echoes

*But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering
them in her heart.*

—*Luke 2:19*

What does it mean to ponder something at the heart level? The dictionary says to ponder is to think about something carefully, to consider, to meditate, or to reflect, especially before we make a decision or reach a conclusion. While we may start to ponder in the mind, what does our pondering look like when it moves from the head to the heart? In Luke 2 we find what Margaret Feinberg recently called a “sacred echo,” where Mary, the mother of Jesus, “ponders” and “treasures” certain events in the life of Jesus at the heart level. Following the birth of Jesus and a visit by the shepherds, “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk. 2:19). We don’t have to read much further to discover what reads like literary *déjà vu* in Luke 2:51: “But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” These two verses

read like a divine echo, reverberating from ancient words regarding sacred moments within a mother's heart.

For several years I have pondered these verses, which led me to write about Mary's journey of faith—from God calling Mary to bear His Son, to her witnessing His crucifixion, and beyond. Perhaps, in pondering the words spoken about her Son Jesus, Mary ultimately found and came to know her Savior. Perhaps it is through pondering God and His Word that we find and come to know Jesus as our personal Savior.

As I followed Mary's journey in Scripture, God began to reveal many parallels in my own life and faith journey. While battling an eating disorder, anxiety, depression, and tragedy in my life, I found connection and hope in Mary's journey with Jesus to the cross. Initially, through these sacred echoes, I sensed God calling me deeper into His Word, into the heart and mind of Mary, into a deeper knowledge of Him, and into a journey of faith like I had never before experienced. God showed me just how far He has carried me into a place of healing and completeness.

You see, I am just a Bible study girl who loves to read about Jesus, talk about Jesus, and teach about Jesus. Just give me Jesus! That's my humble equivalent of Paul's proclamation in 1 Corinthians 2:1–2: "When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Through my study of Scripture in relation to Mary's life, God has relentlessly pursued me, because He understands my desire to relate to a real person. Because God knows we all need real people and stories that are like our own to cling to for hope and inspiration when life unravels, He gave us people like Mary.

As I read through Luke 2, I often wondered what Mary was pondering. As she held her firstborn baby, what was she *really* thinking? Was she just riding on post-labor emotions and hormones, trying to make some sense of this much-anticipated moment in time? Or

was she meditating on a deeper truth, one that God had begun to reveal to her since her encounter with the angel Gabriel? In Luke 2:51, as we hear a sacred echo of Mary treasuring all those things in her heart . . . *heart . . . heart*, we see God pierce Mary's heart in merciful preparation for events to come. I have to admit, I was both intrigued and terrified to dig deeper. What was Mary *really* thinking? What was God *really* doing in her life? Just as the famous song inquires, we have to wonder, "Mary, did you know?"

As I pondered Mary in my own heart, I discovered Mary's story is every believer's story; your religious affiliation does not matter. Mary's story is that of every mother and every woman who is brave enough to say yes to Christ and yes to the life He wills for her. Believers as a whole, especially women, can identify with and relate to Mary as they begin to understand the complexity of her calling.

Mary's story is heartrending, yet beautiful, and crushing, yet full of hope, and it's replete with anticipation, insecurity, fears, doubts, grief, hope and love. Her story is one of mystery and intrigue. It is also sobering with a heavy dose of the realities involved in following Christ. And hidden just beneath the surface of Mary's unique calling to serve as the mother of Christ lies an equally captivating story of her journey of faith. From the first time she says yes to Jesus in the presence of an angel to the day she is filled once again with the Spirit of her risen Savior at Pentecost, we witness a frightened Jewish girl transformed into a woman who overcomes the worst grief imaginable—all by faith.

Mary is the paramount example of a faith flourishing in the midst of all of life's emotions, confusion, shattered dreams, and dreams come true. Her faith is there on the pages of Scripture for us to relate to, connect with, and receive the true gospel message. As I dug past the details and circumstances of Mary's life to unearth her core needs, fears, and desires, I found myself identifying with Mary more and more. I discovered God at work in each detail of her life and in every relationship, teaching her His ways and deepening her faith, just as He has done in my life. In Philippians

2:12, Mary is the perfect example of a believer who “works out her salvation with fear and trembling,” as God teaches her to trust His plan through the life and death of her very own Son. Thus Mary’s journey of faith becomes one in which all roads lead her back to Jesus, the Christ, the Lord and Savior of all.

Come with me on this journey as I share my own life experiences in light of Mary’s journey as found in Scripture. My hope is that Mary becomes real and relevant to you in a very personal way throughout the pages of this book. My prayer is that, as you find yourself and your own journey of faith in the story of Mary, your faith in Jesus Christ will be renewed and strengthened. During the times in our own lives when only faith remains, we can look to Mary’s faith and truly find hope in trusting Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

CHAPTER ONE

Faith, Hope, and Love

*And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love.
But the greatest of these is love.*

—1 Corinthians 13:13

What do you do, and to whom do you turn, when life gets hard and downright hideous, when all love seems lost, and when hope doesn't float anymore? What do you do, and to whom do you turn, when love has abandoned you and glimmers of hope are unrecognizable from the depths of the pit where you stand broken and contrite? I have experienced such depths of this pit, the most dangerous place on earth, and have had to face those same difficult questions.

I was thirteen years old when I developed bulimia, and I was caught in the abyss between all-consuming fear and blind faith in the dark depths of my own personal hell. In my experience, bulimia was a manifestation of a deeper disorder of my heart and soul, fueled by a need to control, to be perfect, and to perform my way through family, school, and athletics.

As a child of divorce, with both parents remarried, I grew up in two amicable homes. But the wounds of divorce—the constant coming and going from each parent’s house and the periods of isolation from either Mom or Dad—had taken their toll during the crucial, formative years of adolescent development. Soon, to keep the peace between four parents and to feel wanted and loved, I became a parent-pleaser. While I matured physically and mentally, my emotional health suffered. Before long I found it hard to cope with the normal stress of day-to-day life. Eventually, my spirit crumbled under the mounting, self-inflicted pressure of producing, performing, and coveting praise.

From my teen years well into my twenties, I secretly turned to food for comfort. Food seemed to fill the void caused by always feeling like I had failed God, my parents, and myself. I relied on food to fill the emptiness and pain in my soul, despite all the success, grades, and accolades I had achieved along the way. As a competitive runner with seriously low body fat, I turned to rich, sugary foods for comfort and relief. To avoid the consequences of the sin of overeating, I made myself sick, but the resulting rush of emotional and spiritual guilt and shame was often overwhelming.

During those frustrating and confusing teen years, my journal entries read, “I’m sorry, God. I messed up again. I promise to try harder tomorrow. I promise to do better.” I constantly felt like I was disappointing either God or my parents, teachers, and coaches, because I was hiding my pain behind an embarrassing secret. I thought I had to be smart enough and strong enough to get better on my own, so I wouldn’t upset my parents and expose my fragile emotional state. The effort to press on in my own strength, while enduring such a physically, mentally, and emotionally damaging disorder, was exhausting.

A concerned coach came right out and asked me, “Are you anorexic?” I confidently replied, “No!” He’d seen the pain in my tired eyes, but he just hadn’t asked the right question.

My unhealthy and dysfunctional relationship with food continued for fifteen years, despite professional counseling, family support (after eventually telling my parents), and medical treatment. I tried to keep my bulimia a secret. My mask of perfectionism and work ethic usually hid my feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. The dysfunctional thinking and hypocrisy that accompany bulimia bled into other areas of my life. After a career-ending running injury in my college years, life as I knew it—along with every significant relationship—spiraled down the drain of depression, isolation, and hopelessness. I came to a dead end in a dark corner where it felt as if bulimia had won. I remember thinking, *This is it. This is who I am. I will never get better. This is most likely how my life will end.* I felt helpless, powerless, and weak, dangling over a grand canyon of hopelessness. I was ready to let go, or so I feared.

When I was about ten, I had accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior, but I did not understand how faith can build a bridge between insecurities and God. I often wondered: if what Scripture says is true, that “these three remain: faith, hope, and love,” then why didn’t it always *feel* this way? Why are our choices in life so often reduced to somewhere between fear and faith, not love, hope and happily ever after? My days were filled with doubt, and there were times when life felt pointless because I didn’t understand Who I was living for. When I reached the point where I had lost all hope and hardened myself against any outpouring of love, I had to hold on for dear life, because that was the point when only faith remained.

Have you ever experienced a time when it felt like only faith remained? When faith is your last hope of ever experiencing the love of God, don’t give up. Hold fast to faith. What do you do, and to whom do you turn, when your only remaining choice is somewhere between fear and faith? Whether we are in the deepest pit or experiencing the highest mountaintop, we’ve all faced this predicament and made a decision at some point in our lives. Do we choose fear or faith, self-doubt or self-surrender? Do we run and

hide from God like Adam and Eve, or can we find the faith to stare headlong into the face of something greater than ourselves?

Mary, the mother of Jesus, understood this feeling, this life-changing, pivotal choice, this predicament of providential proportions! And Mary has a lot to teach us about those moments in life when only faith remains. Although our historical knowledge of Mary is limited, she is woven into Scripture in ways that reveal many truths about God, about Christ, about the power of the Holy Spirit, and about how God used her most important relationships in life for His glory. God utilized everything in Mary's life to teach her about Himself. From the moment she was born, she had a calling, whether she realized it or not. In His perfect timing God poured His Spirit over Mary so that His will would be done on earth, as it is in heaven. God introduced Mary to her Savior in the most intimate way, forming first an umbilical cord in the living bond between mother and child, and later forming a relationship that would eventually become her own eternal lifeline.

God has also placed a calling on each of our lives. In fact, I keep a little Willow Wood plaque of Mary and Joseph on my bookshelf all year round. It reminds me of God's calling on my life to teach and write about Him and His Word. Our calling may seem trivial compared to Mary's; however, to compare them is to miss the point completely. The point is *how* God teaches us, not *what* He uses. God uses our individual calling to teach us His ways, His character, His mercy, and His great love for us. God's greatest desire is for us to know Him, and, while the teaching is the same, the journeys to knowledge and understanding are different. Even Mary needed to learn about unconditional love and unwavering hope, so God took her on a journey to the cross. He does the same for us. We can learn so much from studying Mary and all the places she appears in Scripture because ultimately God is trying to teach us some of the very same truths.

God's calling on your life and mine doesn't necessarily include a divine pregnancy, but it does include an invitation to enter into an intimate relationship with Jesus that permeates the deepest and most delicate parts of our being. Similar to what Mary experienced, God utilizes everything in our lives to draw us closer to Him. He uses our strengths, our weaknesses, our friends, our spouse, our worst nightmares, and our highest hopes to reveal His great love, grace, and mercy. Let us celebrate Mary's journey, knowing God has each of us on a journey of faith, salvation, and completeness in Christ.

As the mother of Jesus, Mary is revered by many. However, our love for Mary as the mother of Christ unites us in a passion for learning about and exploring her journey of faith. We find common ground in God's grace and admire His work in Mary's life and faith. Let us all unite in the essentials of our Christian faith, for we are all God's people, the church, and the body of Christ here on earth. May our personal theology not place boundaries around our personal transformation.

Take a moment to think about where you are on your journey. Maybe you have yet to meet your Savior, or maybe you've been on your journey of faith with Christ for many years. Perhaps your life's journey has taken you places you never really wanted to go or given you experiences you only wish you could forget. It's okay. You are never too far from God for Him to lose sight of your soul. He sees you, He seeks you, and He sent His Son to rescue you from sin. When God calls us into His will and purpose, He sovereignly orchestrates each page of our story—each leg of the trip, each season, each detour, each pit stop, and each seemingly dead end—to somehow lead us back to Him. He uses everything and wastes nothing. Let us follow Mary to the cross and beyond, no matter what the cost, trusting that all roads will lead us back to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

PRAYER

God, broaden and deepen our walk of faith as we embark on this journey with Mary. By the power of the Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to Your will and Your way. Help us to identify with, relate to, endear, embrace, and fall in love with Mary, the mother of Jesus, as we grow closer in faith and love to the Father and the Son. In Jesus's name. Amen.