

# The Piercing Of A Mother's Own Soul

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What would it be like to sit down with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and just listen to her stories? Can you imagine? What was she thinking when the angel Gabriel appeared to her out of nowhere with words that have shaped human history?

*“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you! Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:28-35).*

Mothers have quite naturally wanted the best for their children for thousands of years. What mother holds a newborn baby in her arms and does not yearn for her son or daughter to enjoy success, fulfillment, and happiness? But this? What does one do with such promises of greatness? Mary's son, a king after the royal lineage of David? An unending reign? The Son of God? How? Why her?

What did she do for the rest of that fateful day? How did she even dream of telling Joseph? What went through her mind the first time she felt the promised child flutter in her womb?

And what was that glorious and frightening night like in Bethlehem when *“the time came for her to give birth”*? Again, what mother does not daydream for months about what that moment will be like? Where she will be. Who will be with her. Her first moments with her firstborn. And yet, if ever there was a setting that did not go according to a mother's plans this must have been it. Swaddling cloths for the Son of the Most High? A manger for David's heir? Had God forgotten his promises?

If there was any doubt, it must have been calmed by the arrival of marveling shepherds. They quickly recounted how an angel of the Lord had appeared to them while they were keeping watch over their flock, and the glory of the Lord had shone around them. The angel had said,

*“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”*

Suddenly a multitude of the heavenly host had appeared, praising God and saying, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*

As the shepherds breathlessly made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child, *“all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them,”* and understandably so!

*“But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:6-19).* Even in the most unlikely of circumstances and trying of times, the Almighty had not forgotten Mary and her child. There may not have been room for them in the inn, but the promised Son had been born exactly where his heavenly Father intended.

Nearly six weeks later, *“the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses” (Luke 2:22).* As had been done by new parents for hundreds of years, Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. They came to the beautiful Temple of Jehovah with two birds to sacrifice, being too poor to offer a lamb to the priest of God. But as they approached, an old man named Simeon who had been *“waiting for the consolation of Israel”* took Jesus in his arms and blessed God, saying,

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32).*

It had been revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Finally, that time had come and he was exuberant! He blessed Joseph and Mary who must have continued to marvel at what had been and continued to be said about their newborn son. But for the first time, a note of darkness stained the beautiful chronicle of their child as Simeon looked directly at Mary and said,

*“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35).*

Her child would be great, but his greatness would draw some and repel others. He would be called Son of the Most High, God’s anointed to rule on the throne of David, but his claims would serve as a stumbling block to those who opposed his sovereignty. Of his kingdom there would be no end, but its coming would coincide with a sword to pierce his mother’s own soul. And not just any sword. The word used by Simeon is *rhomphaia* in Greek, a long and broad blade more comparable to a javelin than a dagger. *Rhomphaia* is the word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the sword of the mighty giant Goliath. One day, Simeon said, such a sword would pierce Mary’s own soul.

She must have felt at least the sword’s prick twelve years later following the annual Feast of the Passover (*Luke 2*). According to Jewish custom, Joseph, Mary and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. *“And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind” (v. 43).* The problem was *“his parents did not know it.”* When they discovered Jesus’ absence, Joseph and Mary must have searched frantically. Not just for hours, but for days they looked in vain, with each lead turning up empty. The Son of the Most High had been given to them for safekeeping and he was nowhere to be found! What must have gone through Mary’s mind? How could she possibly hope to sleep not knowing where her firstborn son had gone?

*After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the*

*teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress" (v. 46-48).*

If you are a parent, you can easily relate to the feelings behind Mary's statements. What a powerful wave of relief, exasperation, confusion and frustration must have rolled over her in a moment! A mother whose son has wandered away unnoticed knows firsthand the urge to squeeze in love and strangle in aggravation at the same time. "Jesus, don't you know that your father and I have been looking for you for days? How could you put us through such an ordeal?" But what must Mary have felt as young Jesus looked her in the eye and said, "*Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*" (v. 49) Did Simeon's foreboding promise from twelve years before echo in her mind?

Mary must have felt the sword's sting as Jesus "*came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up*" (Luke 4). Even if she was not present at the time, surely word would have eventually gotten back to her. One ordinary day, Jesus went to his hometown synagogue and was provided the great honor of publicly reading from the scroll of Isaiah. The opportunity to address all those who had gathered was his. And after reading the prophet's prediction of jubilee, of liberty to the captives, of healing to the blind and freedom to those who were oppressed, Jesus unashamedly claimed, "*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*" (v. 21). The audience marveled but was naturally moved to ask, "*Is not this Joseph's son?*" Hadn't these words been recorded nearly 700 years ago? But Jesus continued his address, revealing himself as a prophet and implicating this audience's hardness of heart. Their reaction? In wrath, "*they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff*" (v. 28-29). Jesus escaped unharmed, but what must Mary have felt when she heard the news? Did she think of Simeon's dark prediction?

How easy would it have been for Mary to hear Jesus' emphatic statement in *Luke 8*? Great multitudes had been following Jesus wherever he went for some time. His mother and his brothers had sought him out in an effort to spend time with him, "*but they could not reach him because of the crowd*" (v. 19). The message slowly spread through the masses, "*Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.*" But he answered them, "*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it*" (Luke 8:20-21). What mother wouldn't have had a tough time accepting such a response?

How must Mary have felt if word got back to her that some were spreading the rumor, "*Jesus casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons*" (Luke 11:15)? Was she in the crowd when a woman raised her voice and said to Jesus, "*Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!*" Was she listening as Jesus responded, "*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it*" (Luke 11:27-28)? Was she a part of the multitude when Jesus turned and said, "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:26)? Was she within earshot as Jesus made prediction after terrible prediction about what would soon happen to him in Jerusalem (Luke 9:22,44; 18:31-33)? Did she try to dissuade him from making the journey? Was she present to watch as her son wept over the city of God (Luke 19:41-44)?

How long was it before she heard of Judas' betrayal? What must she have imagined as Jesus

spent that darkest of nights as a common criminal? Was she in the crowd the next morning to watch as her firstborn son was mockingly presented as the “*King of the Jews*” with a crown of thorns pressed into his scalp and a purple robe sticking to his freshly scarred back? Could she hear the bloodthirsty cries of the multitude as the prevailing call for her son’s hands and feet to be nailed to a cross echoed off of the stone walls?

There is so much that we do not know about Mary during Jesus’ fleeting time on this earth. How she would have handled hearing the accusations of her son being a drunkard and a glutton. What she must have thought as the Pharisees’ animosity toward Jesus became more and more evident. The confused feelings she must have had as Jesus consistently and publicly placed so much more emphasis on spiritual relationships than those of his own family. How she handled her first face-to-face meeting with Peter after his bitter denials of her son. There is so much that we do not know.

But we do know this. Mary was at Golgotha. “*Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene*” (John 19:25).

Jesus’ mother watched as the hands that had reached out for her comfort on a dark night in Bethlehem were pierced with nails on a dark day outside of Jerusalem. She watched as the same feet that had kicked within her virgin womb were brutally fastened to a rugged wooden beam. She watched as the same body she had carefully wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger was raised toward the heavens on a rugged cross.

Wherever she was during the intervening years, Mary was with Jesus as he took his first breaths and his last. Whatever she was doing as Jesus went from city to city fulfilling the will of his heavenly Father, she was there to hear Jesus’ first cries and his last. Regardless of the ways she had dealt with some of Jesus’ most difficult teachings, she stood at the foot of the cross and heard her oldest son make sure that his mother would be provided for after his death (John 19:26-27).

Mary’s tear-filled eyes easily could have wandered from the Roman soldiers who were gambling for Jesus’ tunic, to the Temple across the valley where she and Joseph had brought their infant son more than thirty years earlier, to the darkened heavens above. And she must have remembered.

*“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”*

The soldier’s spear that pierced the side of Jesus is often mentioned as we reflect on his great sacrifice. Let us never forget, however, that a mother’s own soul was figuratively pierced through with a javelin-like sword as well. “*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord*” (Luke 1:45).

Published in  
***Beneath The Cross: Essays and Reflections on the Lord’s Supper***  
DeWard Publishing