

Week Two: *Mary, The Disgraced*
Luke 1:26-56 & Matthew 1:18-25

Spend FIFTEEN – Day One

1. Some say, according to the custom of the day, Mary would have been only 14 or 15 years old and Joseph might have been as old as 40. It seems odd and perhaps even wrong by today's standards, but a man first had to establish himself to present his bride's family with a dowry to be in a position to marry, an arrangement made by her parents on her behalf but almost always with her best interest in mind. An engagement period of a year was established to insure any child born was not conceived prior to marriage. Mary's pregnancy occurred after consent but before marriage, a clear violation of the culture of the day. How hard is it today for people when they appear to have violated social customs?
2. Read Luke 1:26-56. Try to imagine the mixed feelings of Mary... so excited to be so honored, and yet hiding her pregnancy at that same time for fear of ridicule. Have you ever feared ridicule for something you felt others would never understand or accept? Share those feelings if it feels safe to do so.
3. What did Mary do immediately after learning the news of her pending pregnancy – see Luke 1:36, 39 & 56. Why is this significant?
4. How far along was Mary in her pregnancy when she returned to Nazareth? Read Matthew 1:18-25. How might her absence have contributed to the doubt Joseph felt about this pregnancy and how it occurred?
5. Read the Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy 22:13-30. Joseph was a God-fearing man trying to honor his faith and protect his lineage. What does this passage suggest were his options?
6. He no doubt knew that Mary was also a God-fearing person from a faithful family. Put yourself in Mary and Joseph's places. Why was this so hard on both of them?
7. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray for those who suffer from misunderstanding and gossip.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Two

8. According to Deuteronomy 22:13-30, Joseph could have exposed Mary's pregnancy and had her put to death. What does Matthew 1:19 reveal about Joseph?
9. Based on these two readings, how would you describe Joseph and Mary as people? Suggest why God might have chosen them to raise Jesus from childhood.
10. Read Luke 1:47,48. What reasons did Mary give for God's choice of her as the mother of the savior?

11. Read Luke 1:47. What descriptive term does Jesus apply to the Lord? Why is that important?

12. Some Christians honor something called the immaculate conception. Explanation: The Immaculate Conception is a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church in regard to Mary, Jesus' mother. An official statement of the doctrine reads, "The blessed Virgin Mary to have been, from the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Savior of Mankind, preserved free from all stain of original sin." Essentially, the Immaculate Conception is the belief that Mary was protected from original sin, that Mary did not have a sin nature, and was, in fact, sinless. This may seem rational, so that a sinless woman might give birth to a sinless savior. Why is it unnecessary? Again, how does Mary describe the Lord in verse 47? Why would Mary need a savior?

13. Apart from sinlessness, what qualities do you think God saw in Mary and Joseph to choose them as the parents of His son, our savior, Jesus? See Luke 2:19 and also verse 51 for additional insight into the character of Mary.

14. Finish your FIFTEEN by praying to be the kind of person who cares more about pleasing the Lord than meeting the expectations of those you consider friends.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Three

15. Have you or someone you loved ever been the object of gossip or scandal? Share those feelings and observations if you feel safe to discuss them.

16. Does it matter if gossip is based on fact or innuendo? What lessons can we learn from Mary and Joseph on dealing with issues laden with potential for scandal?

17. Were you ever bullied as a child? It's a big problem for young people today. How can Christians help?

18. Some speculate that this pregnancy continued to be a secret between Joseph and Mary, her robes hiding any signs of pregnancy. Do you agree or disagree with that theory? Read Matthew 2:13 and 19-23. How long was it before Joseph brought his family back to Nazareth? How old do you think Jesus might have been by then?

19. Try to imagine the heartbreak Mary felt when Joseph did not initially accept her explanation of how she became pregnant? Describe in your own words how she might have felt.

20. Have you ever been doubted or misunderstood by those closest to you? How hard is it to hold a belief, take a stand or make a decision that others who matter to you do not accept or understand?

21. Conclude your FIFTEEN by praying for those who are making a faithful Christian witness to a spouse, child, parent or friend who refuses to accept their faith.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Four

22. Imagine being Joseph for a moment. He no doubt loved Mary and wanted the best for her, but he didn't want to compromise his faith and decided it was more important to be faithful to God than Mary. Have you ever had to choose between accepting or condoning the behavior of those you love or being faithful to God? Explain.

23. Is it possible to love someone who doesn't share your Christian commitment? Is it possible to love someone and accept them without accepting his view of life or strongly held opinions?

24. How should Christians handle a relationship when they show tolerance for a non-Christians friend's opinions and values but their friend or loved-one remains intolerant of their Christian faith? Is that more or less common today?

25. What's the difference between being a faithful witness and being self-righteous and judgmental? Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 for helpful insight.

26. What do think God had in mind when putting Joseph and Mary through this trial of love and faithfulness? Why does God allow Christians to undergo trials of faith? See Romans 5:1-5 for insight.

27. Read Matthew 1:20. Notice it was only after Joseph had determined his course of action that God intervened by sending an angel. See Genesis 22:6-14 for a parallel story of God allowing a faithful man to struggle before intervening. What lesson can we learn from these two examples?

28. As you finish your FIFTEEN, confess those times you have not made decisions based on faith. Pray to trust God to provide (even at the last moment) in those situations when we are forced to make a difficult decision based on faith.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Five

29. Who do you know who is suffering as a social outcast? Perhaps she is from a different culture, faith, or has a physical or social situation that makes her stand out in a culture of conformity? How could you help?

30. You may have something in your past that you or others have decided makes you unacceptable in "polite society." Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17. What had Paul done in the past that caused him shame?

31. Read Luke 7:40-47. What's the point of Jesus' lesson?

32. How might a sinful past actually be a blessing rather than a curse or a scandal in the life of a Christian?

33. If someone is unable to talk openly about a mistake, an error in judgment or a past scandal, is he truly recovered? Is it

possible for God to forgive a person who cannot forgive himself? How can you help in that situation?

34. What is the most important lesson we can learn from the experience of Mary and Joseph coming to terms with the miraculous nature of her conception?

35. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray to embrace the mess of life with confidence that God will never leave you or forsake you no matter what you have done or how impossible your situation seems.