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*Sacred Journeys*

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Names of people, places, and minor details of events in chapters 5 through 8 have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved.

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# 1 *A Sword through Her Soul*

A decorative flourish consisting of a vertical line with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns, extending downwards from the top of the page.

If anyone faced a complicated family dynamic, it was Jesus' Jewish mother, Mary, whose firstborn was the "begotten one of God." Things were complicated even before the child was born, when the terms were set and Mary, dutifully, complied. "Yes," she said, "I am the Lord's servant. Yes, may everything you have said come true." It is easy to say such things during moments of heavenly revelation or, in her case, visitation. We would all be "the Lord's servants," I daresay, when looking upon the face of a visiting angel. We would all, like Mary, agree to the plan.

The test comes, however, when "the plan" intersects with real life. For Mary, it meant sticking with the plan despite maternal instincts that contradicted it. Her arena of testing came in her role as a mother. But the role we find ourselves in—when it comes to the plan and the test—is beside the point. We may be single or married, parent or childless, young or old. The role doesn't matter. The point is the test

and keeping with the plan when circumstances and instincts militate against doing so.

Mary can help us, not because she was a good mother struggling with the changing nature of her bond with her son, but because in the arena of testing she wrestled with real-life emotions in the face of God's mysterious orchestration. Even the "big players" in God's story—our so-called Bible heroes—empowered by angelic visitations and other miraculous interventions, carried pain, weakness, and sorrow upon their breasts. Sometimes our "heroes" weren't sure if they even saw God in the picture.

That is why Mary's struggle introduces the other struggles in this book. Her struggles were as particular to her as mine are to me—and yours are to you. But hers, and mine, and yours point to something greater. That is, God uses real people in the hard places of real life to work out his plan, often sown in tears and struggle and human failing. It is why God, not Mary or other "big players," is the hero of the Bible.

So I return to Mary's story, a story about a mother whose son, she could rightly say, was "special." But special or not, he was her firstborn son, and that carried with it all the longing and apprehension that is the hallmark of parenthood.

Imagine her thoughts when bringing her six-week-old infant to the temple in Jerusalem to "present him to the Lord" as Jewish law required.\* The temple courtyard had to have smelled, with animals wandering around, all that dirt

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\*References for Scripture quotations and sources for other material referenced in this book are located in the sources section in the back of the book.

and sewage. Strangers carrying birds in cages or dragging along goats or sheep came and went, sacrificing this or consecrating that. What first-time parents wouldn't feel overwhelmed?

If all the braying, snorting, and howling of animals on the temple grounds were not enough, a strange old man approached Joseph and Mary and "took the child in his arms." At this point Mary may have been thinking, *Has he washed his hands?* His name was Simeon, and he said strange things: "I have seen the Savior you have given to all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"

How could he know such things?

He turned to Mary and looked at her with sad eyes. "And a sword will pierce your very soul."

That wasn't the impression Mary had gotten the day the angel Gabriel appeared to her. Gabriel had said, "Don't be frightened, Mary, . . . for God has decided to bless you! You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High." *What could this ridiculous old man Simeon be thinking?*

One might naturally assume that Simeon was referring to the anguish Mary experienced when she watched her son die. She remained with him throughout his ordeal, standing beneath his cross until he breathed his last. There could be no darker moment for any mother. Yet my own reading of the Gospels convinces me that the "sword" that pierced Mary's soul did so many times before that moment. Such

piercings are the movements of faith and the work of God's grace, though at the time they don't feel that way, and they didn't feel that way to Mary. Even she could not escape hard lessons about conforming her inclinations to the greater purpose of God's plan. Often those lessons were for her (and are for us) tangled in a web of fragile and often conflicting emotions. Yet for all the moments of heartache she surely endured, there still must have also been countless times when she beamed with pride over her firstborn son and wanted to shout, "That's my boy!" Mary was, as I've said, a Jewish mother.



I have had such moments of pride with my three sons over the years, and this has helped me understand Mary. One moment that stands out occurred when we lived in Honduras several years ago. Jon, our youngest, played right field for the Little League baseball team called the *Promesas* (Spanish for "Promises"). The *Promesas*, in a word, stunk. They had not won a game all season. During this particular game, we were losing 12 to 7 in the bottom of the eighth.

Jon stepped up to the plate. The opposing team had brought in a new pitcher. He struck out the first two *Promesa* batters without breaking a sweat. But it didn't take long before he started getting overconfident. Soon he was throwing balls. And just like that, the bases were loaded with walked *Promesa* batters.

Our team was down by five runs. A home run would erase four and make it, for once, a real game. That's when Jon

came up to bat. For all the chatter and mayhem coming from the stands, you would have thought that the Honduran democracy stood or fell on what the boy did at the plate.

His coaches were yelling frantic instructions: “¡Chóquela, Juan! ¡Cuidala!” (“Choke up, Jon! Watch it now!”) Honduran moms won all the prizes for enthusiasm, twirling noise-makers, whistling, jumping up and down, stomping their feet (some in high heels). The stadium crowd was on their feet. Jon was still only learning Spanish, but he got the point. Even so, he seemed tentative. This was detectable in subtle movements that only a mother could pick up. He stood in the batter’s circle, waiting to bat, and sliced the bat halfheartedly. He jostled his helmet and fiddled with his batting gloves. He tapped his shoe with the bat. Then it was his turn to step into the batter’s box.

Making my way down the bleachers, I pressed against the chain-link fence behind the batter’s box. I knew better than to try to get Jon to look at me. I didn’t need his personal acknowledgment. I just wanted him to hear my voice.

“Don’t back off this guy, Jon. He’s getting tired. He’s wild. Meet the pitch. Keep your eye on it.”

He scraped home plate with his shoe, cocked his head, adjusted his helmet, and crouched, elbows up, in the batting position. “¡Juan! ¡Juan! ¡Juan!” The crowd was roaring behind him.

“You can do it, Jon!” I yelled to him.

Don’t you know that boy made contact the very first pitch—a blooper down the middle, between second and third. Two base runners scored, and Jon lost his batting helmet pedaling

around the bases. He settled at second, and the crowd had gone wild. I couldn't even yell, "That's my boy!" because of the lump in my throat. Safe at second base, he pulled off his batting gloves, shoved them in his pocket, and put his hands on his knees. He threw me a look, and that was my moment. I felt like the Queen of All Mothers. That was *my boy*. I was his mom. Apart from the bat's meeting the ball, in that moment that was the only connection that mattered.

Mary must have had many such queen-motherish moments. Her son "grew . . . in height and in wisdom, and he was loved by God and by all who knew him." Yet at the same time, contrary to my experience at the ball game, Mary's son did not always pass her a knowing look that warmed her heart at certain defining moments. That troubled me when I read these narratives. At times Jesus seemed insensitive, if not rude, to his mother. Imagine the wonder and pride that welled up in the young virgin after Gabriel's visit. She was to give birth to the only Son of God! "I rejoice in God my Savior! . . . Now generation after generation will call me blessed."

But that might have been the last time we see Mary unequivocally happy. That transcendent moment quickly became overshadowed by a steady stream of heartwrenching moments that tested Mary's trust in the plan. The first would be the unenviable task of telling her fiancé, Joseph, that she was pregnant. (Joseph took it well, considering.) The next would be the hard journey on an ass, nine months pregnant, cross country, only—third—to end up giving birth in a cave in the company of goats and sheep. I would wager these inconveniences evaporated once she held the little one in her



arms and suckled him at her breast—her very own son, the glorious creature she had pushed through her loins! But this wondrous event began a journey of faith that exacted many more piercings of Mary's soul.

There was the time, for example, when Mary and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem with their prepubescent boy to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover. At the end of the festival, they left for home, assuming that Jesus was with friends among their fellow travelers. But failing to find him among their relatives after the first day of travel, they realized they had left their young boy behind in Jerusalem (the big city!) and undertook a desperate search that lasted for three days.

I can relate to the desperation Mary and Joseph must have felt as they searched for Jesus. For a brief, bone-chilling interlude sixteen years ago we lost our two-year-old son on the Mall in Washington, D.C. One minute he was toddling at our feet, and the next he was nowhere to be seen. In that single moment I was overrun with terror, panic, and utter helplessness until we found him, thankfully, climbing a fence several yards away. (Sons climbing things is a cross mothers of sons must bear.) By that point my pulse rate had dropped, my skin waxed ashen, and my knees felt ready to give way.

Jesus' parents carried such terror for three days—*three days*. Mary couldn't have slept much, which wouldn't have helped her mood. I have sometimes wondered if Mary entertained thoughts like I do when I am watching a suspense film that stars Robert DeNiro—you know he won't die. He can't die. He's the star. He's Robert DeNiro! That eases the suspense

for me. Maybe, given the optimistic account received from Gabriel, Mary thought, *Okay, he's lost, but it's not supposed to end this way. He's the Messiah. We'll find him.*

Indeed, they found him, surrounded by religious leaders, chatting casually in the temple. Mary was understandably miffed. "Son! . . . Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere." Who could blame her? She hadn't slept for two nights and had been searching frantically for days. And when they finally found him, did he run to their waiting arms, expressing relief and affection? To the contrary, he was nonchalant. Had he not been the Messiah, one might have thought him an upstart in need of an attitude adjustment. Worse, the twelve-year-old turned the rebuke of the parents back upon them. He responded by saying two things: First, he said, they should have known where he would be ("Why did you need to search?"); and second, God—not Joseph—was his father ("You should have known that I would be in my Father's house.") They should have known that, too.

Despite the remonstrance, when it was said and done, Jesus returned with his parents to Nazareth and "was obedient to them."

I have often wondered what the day was like for Mary when, as an adult, Jesus heard the call of John the Baptist. By this time Joseph had died, and Jesus had assumed the role of carpenter in his father's shop. In keeping with the law, he would also have taken the mantle of leadership in the family. But the day came when "the call" summoned him. As preacher and seminary professor Fred Craddock describes it,

“Jesus untied the apron strings, lifted the carpenter’s apron over his head, put it on the bench and left the shop.”

Did he say good-bye to his mother? Did he kiss her on the cheek? *What will you do about dinner?* Or did he depart without a word, leaving Mary to find the shop empty, the apron on the bench?

Maybe Mary thought of Joseph, standing there alone in the empty workshop. His ghost had been overtaken by the scraping and pounding of her firstborn son. Now he was gone, too. *Why do we have children? Is it worth this much pain? You give them your heart, and then they take it and run. All you’ve got left is the apron on the bench.*

Perhaps, in such a moment, she’d summon the memory of the visit from the angel Gabriel. *I knew this day would come*, she might hear herself say, while in her heart of hearts she hoped maybe it would have worked out differently. After all, so much time had passed since the angel appeared. Maybe God would forget the hard part of the plan.

But God didn’t forget. His plan was on track and moving forward. *And a sword will pierce your own soul, too.*

Maybe Mary took heart when she realized that although Jesus no longer lived in the house, she could see him frequently. She could remain in his close circle of associates. Maybe that’s why she went boldly to him at the wedding in Cana to tell him the wine had run out. Maybe she was tugging at his elbow when she alerted him, “They have no more wine.”

He did not say, “Sure thing, Ma. I’ll get right on it.” In fact, he seemed irked. Some translations record that he called his mother “woman”—not derisively, like “Hey, lady!” but not

in a sense that evoked the intimate bond between a mother and son either. His response was curt: “How does that concern you and me?” or “What is there between you and me?” He was redefining the boundaries of this relationship.

Then he added a second rebuke to his mother: “My time has not yet come.” Maybe Mary was pressuring him—*Begin already! Get on with your messianic appointment.* After all, he had left the carpenter’s shop to do *something*. Or maybe she went to him out of habit. He was the oldest. Aren’t they the most responsible? He had always been the one who fixed things.

In the end he answered his mother’s request, but only after setting out the terms. He made clear that whatever “glory” he would exhibit in this moment was not derived by her promptings. Their relationship had changed. He might as well have said, “When are you going to stop calling me your son?”

*But I’m your mother!* A mother can’t just stop calling a son a son. Even in the prophets the Lord God himself said, “Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for a child she has borne?”

Mary came to him another time when Jesus was looking overworked. He had gained a groundswell of popularity as a teacher and had become known as one who possesses “unusual” powers. Crowds swarmed around him, touching him and clamoring requests. He was pressed on every side with constant demands for his time and attention. *What kind of mother would I be not to intervene?*

Jesus and his followers sought respite in a home, probably Peter’s. But even that was soon overrun with curiosity seek-

ers. The hubbub was so frenzied that “he and his disciples couldn’t even find time to eat.”

*He’ll starve. He needs oxygen. The lack of air is affecting his mind. So Mary and the brothers undertook an “intervention.” It’s for his own good. He’s out of his mind, they thought. The family did what families do. They rallied around and tried to take him home with them.*

When Jesus finally realized his mother and brothers were outside looking for him, did he interrupt his conversation, excuse himself, and make his way out to see them? Did he seek to reassure them? No. In fact, he challenged the very notion of family relationships: “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?”

The terms of the bond had changed. As far as he was concerned, his family was no longer defined by blood. His family was “anyone who does God’s will.”

What else could Mary have done? All the angelic revelations and prophetic confirmations in the world did not change the fact that he was still her son.



Some time later the people of Jerusalem hailed her son as he entered the city gates riding on a donkey and looking like a king. What an exciting day. “Who is this?” some may have queried.

Mary did not shout, “That’s my boy!” A mother knows her son’s face. Mary saw that her son’s was like flint. Tears streamed down his cheeks. She knew they did not spring from the palms, the “hosannas,” and the effervescence of the moment.

The authorities seized her son a week later, and all the disciples fled. Maybe one of them—probably John—went to Mary. She would have been able to tell by the look on his face that the time had come. And so, she went to find her son, to be with him in those final hours. Maybe Mary was numbered among the “great crowds [that] trailed along behind, including many grief-stricken women,” as he was making his way to Golgotha, staggering under the weight of the beam.

*Can't somebody help him?*

Maybe a mother's cries moved the heart of a guard that day when he seized Simon of Cyrene and “forced [him] to follow Jesus and carry his cross.”

The next picture we have is of Mary crumpled at her son's bleeding feet. Where else would she be? She used to check him for fevers. She bandaged his cut fingers and washed his cloak. *Curse that man Simeon in the temple! If I never hear another prophecy again, it will be too soon!* And now a heap of tears and wails sitting at the foot of her son's cross is all that remains of a loving mother's pierced soul.

*Why did the angel call me favored? Where is the favor in this?*

“Dear woman.” She would look up and meet the eyes of her dying son, who was trying to speak between gasps for air. “Here is your son.” He would turn his head slightly and look at John, the disciple who had brought her. “Here is your mother.”

Mother.

*Frantic instructions from the crowd was all my boy could hear. “Save yourself! If you are truly king, come down from that cross!” He couldn't speak. It was all he could do to breathe. I didn't need him to acknowledge me. I just*

*wanted him to hear my voice. My son looked at me—and I couldn't utter a word because of the lump in my throat.*

*He was my boy. I was his mother. No other connection mattered.*

Did Mary linger in the carpenter shop the day her son left? Did she pick up the apron from the bench and hang it on the peg? Did she start dinner? Was she confounded by the rebuke at Cana? Or when Jesus asked amid the throng at Peter's house, "Who is my mother?" Such questions and affliction are part of dying the small deaths that precede living new life. Even the handmaiden of the Lord had to be made new. As a mother, Mary needed to understand why her beloved son would treat her that way. He understood that. But he also understood that as a struggling human being, she needed the Savior more. And how could she have found her Savior without first letting go of her son?