

TREASURING, PONDERING, AND MEDITATING WITH MARY

Luke 2: 19 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

A little boy named Mark almost ran his parents ragged as a little boy. He started singing before he learned to talk. His parents' patience with him deserves a big part of the credit for Mark's song that has gripped millions of people as we celebrate Christmas. As a preschooler, Mark belted out solos in the grade school choir. By third grade, he was singing the lead part in the Easter musical. But in school, Mark stood out for more than his singing. He was often a problem in the classroom. During his first years of elementary school, Mark Lowry was diagnosed as hyperactive and placed on medication. He had no athletic ability, and was to his school-mates no more than an energetic klutz. He was called an out of control mini-tornado. Rather than agree with students and teachers that Mark was a hopeless case and cause, Mark's parents made sure they looked at his "curse" as a blessing. They refused to dismiss or sidetrack Mark. They kept emphasizing the positive. That little boy, grown to be a man, in 1984, was asked by his pastor in Houston to write a song for their living Christmas tree choir presentation. During the project, Mark thought about what it would have been like to have been Jesus' mother. He began to think of himself as interviewing Mary. As he began to write the poem, the words he wrote sent chills up and down his spine. A good musician took the poem and wrote some music, but the music didn't move Mark. Finally, in 1988 when Gary McSpadden left the Gaither Vocal Band, Bill Gaither went looking for a replacement to fill the void in his quartet. God led Bill Gaither to Mark Lowry. Mark was with the Gaither Vocal Band for two years, when another young songwriter came to join Bill Gaither. His name was Buddy Green. One day on the Gaither Bus, Mark decided to share his words with Buddy, asking him to 'please add some beautiful music.' Buddy did the rest. He wrote the haunting music to this song we all love. Even President Bill Clinton said it was his favorite Christmas carol. By now do you know which song Mark Lowry wrote? What is it? "Mary, Did You Know?" I want you to listen to the words as I read and as we prepare today to join Mary this Christmas in treasuring, pondering, and meditating in our hearts about the birth of Jesus.

"Mary, did you know, that your baby boy
Would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know, that baby boy
Would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?
This Child that you delivered,
will soon deliver you.
Mary, did you know, that your
baby Will give sight to the blind man?
Mary, did you know, that your baby

boy Would calm a storm with His hand? Did you know, that your baby boy Has walked where angels trod, And when you kiss your little baby, you've kissed the face of God? Oh Mary, did you know? Mary did you know? The blind will see, the deaf will hear, The dead will live again. The lame will leap, the dumb will speak Praises of the Lamb? Mary, did you know, that your baby boy Is Lord of all creation? Mary, did you know, that your baby boy Will one day rule the nations? Did you know, that your baby boy Was Heaven's perfect Lamb And this sleeping Child you're holding Is the Great I Am?" Don't be mistaken. Mary knew; of course she knew! She knew more than anyone else that her Son was The Son of God right from the moment of conception by the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist confirmed this in the womb of Elizabeth as he leaped in the womb of Elizabeth, as Elizabeth declared to Mary, "You are the mother of my Lord." Mary knew when it was the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her and she knew as the baby grew inside her for nine months, that the incarnate God the Son was Emmanuel, God with us.

Today, God has called me to treasure and ponder and meditate with you, beloved on Luke 2: 19 where we read, "But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. What did Mary treasure and ponder and meditate on? Twelve years later, after Jesus was in the temple teaching the elders, Mary was still pondering, Luke 2: 51. In fullness, only God knows all she pondered, but we know that part of the pondering had to do with the humble shepherds coming, leaving their ewes and lambs at lambing time to come and see the Christ-Child after the amazing visit by the angel of the Lord accompanied by the angelic choir. I cannot tell you all Mary pondered on, but as I have pondered the setting, the story, the skillful salvation plan, and the salvaging significance of Christ's birth, I feel certain I understand four parts of what Mary knew. What at the very least are these four of the many thoughts Mary must have treasured, and pondered and meditated on after the birth of Jesus? What should we treasure, ponder, and meditate on this Christmas?

GOD HELP US TREASURE, PONDER, AND MEDITATE ON THE SETTING OF CHRIST'S BIRTH. (I.) The political setting we find in Luke 2: 1-5. Jews were being ruled by the Romans. Politics was not in the hands of godly men. It was a time of gloom and doom for Israel, with the nation almost forgetting about the promises of the coming of Messiah. But there were a few exceptions, and those folk had a overwhelming expectancy that Christ the Messiah was on the way. As to the religious setting, after the circumcision of Mary's baby, when He was named Jesus, Luke 2: 21, Jesus

was brought up to Jerusalem. Why was Jesus brought up to Jerusalem? Turn with me to Leviticus 12: 1-8. The sinless Savior of the world was born incarnate, but Jesus had to begin his earthly life in the humiliation of identifying with us, undergoing the humiliation of having to have a sacrifice made for His purification. Notice Luke 2: 22—that the purification was for Mary and Jesus—we read, “the days for their purification.” After 40 days, because Joseph and Mary were poor, they brought two pigeons to be sacrificed in the temple at Jerusalem. The sacrifices symbolized that the sacrificer deserved death, but the sacrificial animal was loaded with the guilt and death penalty for the sake of the sacrificer. Thus the lamb or the pigeons entered into death as a covering for sin that God might set the sacrificer free from the guilt of sin. The death penalty lay on the first-born, and Jesus, born of the virgin Mary was the first-born. Ultimately, God knew that no lamb or pigeon can remove sin. So when Jesus must grew to become a man, He knew that He would take upon Himself the death-penalty for every man, for whose salvation He came incarnate.

Ponder the expectation setting with me. The sacrifices required were sacrificed when we meet one of the very few folk who had divine expectations at the time of Jesus’ birth. Read on with me—Luke 2: 25-32. Simeon and later Anna the prophetess were waiting for the birth of Jesus, but expecting Jesus to come before they died as two elderly believers. God had promised Simeon he would not see death until he had seen the Lord’s Christ—Messiah. God answered Simeon’s expectancy. As we ponder with Mary the birth of Christ, do we have Simeon’s same expectancy about the promised second coming of Jesus? Are we banking on Jesus returning to earth to totally change the scene of this economically collapsing world? Not even a born again president elected in 2012, should it happen, can bring Luke 2: 14 to pass—“peace on earth, good will toward men.” Jesus said, in Luke 21:38, “When these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draweth nigh.” Jesus was saying, I am coming again a second time.” First of all, Mary had to have often pondered the setting of Jesus’ birth, and even the birthplace being miraculously changed from Nazareth to Bethlehem, by a human decree of a Roman emperor who declared he was god. Secondly,

GOD HELP US TREASURE, PONDER, AND MEDITATE ON THE STORY OF CHRIST’S BIRTH. (II.) Christ’s birth from the get-go has always been a “tug-of-war.” The tension is between the downward pull of the world and the upward call of God—His omnipotent tug from glory.

Christmas is doubtless the historical account, the story of an inn in Bethlehem with no room, Luke 2: 7. Christmas is the story of a madly jealous king, King Herod, seeking Jesus' whereabouts, pretending he wished to worship Him, while he was laying plans to destroy Him, Matthew 2: 8. Christmas is the story of a thronging of city streets all over the Roman world, pulled on and tugged at by earthly trifles, little affairs, by a census. The world was totally unaware that history was being split, divided into BC and AD by the faint cry of a Baby boy. Christmas is the story of our uncharitableness without the Savior, illustrated by the innkeeper, it reminds us of our deceit and duplicity as Herod, and of our limited ability to comprehend the things that are truly important. Christmas reminds us of the downward drag of our attentions and loyalties. Mary had to have pondered this mighty tug-of-war.

Yet in contrast to the downward drag of history with His story—mainly Christmas is not a downward drag, but an upward tug. Wise men are drawn from parts unknown in the east to leave Persia and come to Bethlehem to fall down and worship baby Jesus. Matthew 2: 2 tells us that the wise men felt the upward tug, as the magi told Herod, “For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him.” Unkempt, unclean shepherds leave their sheep that needed them with their little lambs as they were drawn to one little Life who is the Life. They felt the upward tug of God's angelic choir. Luke 2: 15 declares that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” The same tug-of-war is going on today. Which pull is pulling you, beloved? Is the upward pull toward Bethlehem greater than the pull downward in this sinful world? The balance of power when Jesus was born was pulling downward. What chance did this helpless Baby Jesus have pitted against King Herod's legions? It's a matter of perspective. In the short-view, this world belongs to the prince of the power of the air, to Herod's world—the downward tug. Don't overlook the battle going on between good and evil, between God and Satan, between Christ and Anti-Christ. Faith doesn't blind us to things as they are, but biblical faith insists, that in spite of the awful present and the disturbing past, the future must be accounted for before the whole story can be told. We as believers know what God knows, and we feel and heed the upward tug. This tug from above is the strongest pull for this world is not really Herod's world, this is my Father's world. Those with expectations such as Simeon and Anna feel the upward tug. Wise men were drawn to worship Jesus, the Christ-Child. Shepherds were drawn to worship the Baby Jesus in the manger. Jesus, the Prince of

Peace shall reign. We will reign with Him, if we answer the upward pull and tug of God. Ponder with Mary 33 years later even when a sword pierced her soul as Mary watched her son Jesus die for her to save her from her own sins. The downward pull is never the last word. Thirdly,

GOD HELP US TREASURE, PONDER, AND MEDITATE ON THE SKILLFUL SALVATION PLAN OF CHRIST'S BIRTH. (III.) Go back to some of Mary's original ponderings after Elizabeth declared that her baby, John the Baptist, leaped in her womb. Turn to Luke 1: 41-47. Mary's first ponderings were about the mystery and wonder that in her own womb, conceived in her as a virgin, was not only the Savior of all who will believe Him, but inside her, she was carrying her own eternal Savior. Beloved, think of it! Ponder with me the mighty skill of our pioneer fore-fathers in riflery. They shot with amazing accuracy. It was for them a matter often of life and death. They must hit the target or die of starvation. Those old Kentucky long-rifles and muzzleloaders would take up to one minute to reload. If a deer was missed, deer didn't wait around for the hunter to reload. Game shot at, when missed, is gone in a flash. Modern hunters today suffer from the disadvantage of owning and operating bolt-action, pump, and semi-automatic and automatic rifles. The result is carelessness and inaccuracy. Modern hunters have the idea, "I have lots of chances." Thus many a hunter blows a lot of excellent opportunities by abandoning the "one-shot only" philosophy of the early pioneers.

Beloved, the skillful plan for our salvation is God's one-shot-only plan. His plan was and still is Bethlehem, Gethsemane, Calvary, the empty tomb. God never came with a back-up plan. The most accurate target ever aimed at and successfully achieved is when Jesus came, Galatians 4: 4,5 in the fullness of time in Bethlehem. Paul tells us, "But when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." We all need to return to God's "one-shot-only" skillful plan of salvation. There is no other Name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. (Acts 4: 12) We have no promise of any other moment to receive Christ than today. "Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts." (Hebrews 3: 7) Today is the day of salvation. (II Corinthians 6: 2) If we refuse to witness the Gospel today, we may never have the same chance tomorrow. Today is the day to take aim and fire with God's skillful plan of salvation. Today is the day to live as if it is our last day, our last breath—our one last shot before Jesus comes or takes us home

through death. God help us to abandon our automatic rifle attitude. Let's live for Jesus today. Then we won't miss God's best. "We have this moment today." 4thly,

GOD HELP US TREASURE, PONDER, AND MEDITATE ON THE SALVAGING SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST'S BIRTH. (IV.) How could Mary ever forget the day Joseph gave up his plans to divorce her privately, thinking Mary had been unfaithful to him, throwing away her virginity as a betrothed woman? I read in Matthew 1: 18-21, ending in v. 21-- "And she will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." Mary could never forget that she was one of those sinners. That's why she exulted in Luke 1: 46, 47 saying, "My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Savior." Beloved, Christmas is God's divine salvaging of no good human wreckage. Christmas is God's supreme act of salvaging, for He came "to seek and to save that which was lost." (Luke 19:10) Christmas is God identifying with sinners like you and me, and taking us 'good for nothing' sinners, and reclaiming us, and making us like Him into useful disciples and servants and friends, and His bride for His kingdom. How often did Mary ponder on carrying her own Savior? Michaelangelo, that supreme artist of the Italian Renaissance, once salvaged a huge block of marble from the sculptor Donatelli. Donatelli rejected the huge piece of marble because it was imperfect. From this once rejected block of worthless marble for Donatelli, Michaelangelo sculpted one of the greatest sculptures of all time—the noble and majestic statue of David. Through history, this sculpture has remained unexcelled.

The story of Christmas is clear in Romans 8: 1,2 which are Christmas verses. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death." We all love to sing the chorus, "Something beautiful, something good, all my confusion, He understood. All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife, but He made something beautiful out of my life." The angel said in Matthew 1: 21 to Joseph, "And she will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save, salvage, reclaim, redeem, and rescue His people from their sin." Christmas is God's trip to the dump, looking for jewels. We sing, "When He cometh, when He cometh to make up His jewels..." What does God have to work with? Only sinners He transforms and salvages. Remember God is still at it. He is still filling us with uncommon hope in the face of despair, He is still winning the tug-of-

war against our enemy. God is still making His one and only shot count. There is only one Savior. Jesus said, John 14: 6—“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” Jesus said, in John 8: 24, “Unless you believe that I am He—God’s only Son—God’s one shot, you shall die in your sins. God is still making millions of trips to the dump. If you haven’t received Jesus, Jesus is at the dump-this sinful world, looking for you. That’s where He found me.

May God bless our treasuring, pondering, and meditating with Mary this Christmas as we ponder the setting, the story, the skillful salvation plan, and the salvaging significance of Christ’s birth. Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift, Jesus. One final question, “Beloved, do you know that this Child is Heaven’s perfect Lamb, that this sleeping child Mary was holding is our great “I Am!?” Amen.