

Does God Care?

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 85; James 5:7-11; Luke 1:26-56

Prayer for Illumination

Grant us, O Lord God, the knowledge of your divine words, and fill us with the understanding of your holy Gospel and the riches of your divine gifts and the indwelling of your Holy Spirit. Enable us with joy to keep your holy commandments and accomplish them and fulfill your will, and to be accounted worthy of the blessings and the mercies that are from you now and at all times. *Syrian Jacobite Liturgy*

The Good News

It is that time of year when you send and receive cards displaying Santa and his reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, and Mary and Joseph with their cuddly baby Jesus. The soft glow of the moonlight caresses the holy family as the shepherds bow, the angels sing, and the gentle animals admire the new-born Son of God. These pictures can be a little sentimental, but they are truthful as far as they go. It *was* a holy family, and the baby Jesus *was* worshiped by shepherds and angels. But that is not all to the story.

We do not know how old Mary was when the angel appeared to her. Some preachers dogmatically declare that she was a teenager. Maybe. But the text does not say, so we cannot be sure. It is certainly likely, in that culture, that she was on the early side of middle age. At any rate she was not married, so this was an announcement that she was going to be pregnant out of wedlock. Now there are a lot of unmarried mothers in the U.S. today, but in that culture there was a terrible stigma on being pregnant and unmarried. The angel did not call attention to this fact, instead focusing on the blessing of her unusual child.

The land in which Mary lived was not a happy place. Once Israel had been the golden kingdom of the Mediterranean. Kings David and Solomon reigned over a small, but prosperous, beautiful, and peaceful land. But a slow rot set in, and eventually the Jews were conquered and carried off to a foreign land. Their beautiful city and temple was burned. They never fully recovered. But God sent a succession of prophets to promise that He had not forgotten His people, that He would visit them, and that He would establish a king even more majestic than David in a kingdom more glorious than Solomon's. The Davidic line of kings had been cut down, but there remained descendants. Like the roots of a tree that has been cut down, life remains in the stump – and in time the tree will flourish again. The Spirit of God, who brought power and wisdom to David and Solomon would be upon this new king. He would establish righteousness in the land and peace, even among the animals – “and his resting place shall be glorious.”

Mary was a godly young woman. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth and all faithful Jews, Mary longed for the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies. She must have joined her countrymen in prayer for God to appear, to drive out the barbaric Romans, to establish his own righteous king, and to bring peace to the land once again. But it had been four hundred years since Jerusalem fell to the gentiles. Four hundred years! God's people prayed and hoped, but more than once they wondered, “Has God forgotten about us? Does God care?” So when the angel announced the end of the long occupation by ungodly gentiles, Mary was quick to answer. At first she was confused about how she would get pregnant, seeing that she was a virgin. But when the angel explained this to her, she immediately replied, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

I think most godly young women would respond in a similar way. “Mary, it is time to restore Israel to glory. Do you want to help?” No one would say “No.” This is what everyone dreamed of! This is what they had prayed for – Mary and her parents and grandparents for centuries. The day had arrived at last! This was unbelievably exciting! It was better than being invited to help the president, or asked to join the crew of the space station. Mary was ecstatic! This called for laughter and celebration! Until the next day.

The Problem

Pregnancy is a hopeful and happy time for any woman, but it is also full of challenges. At first you are nauseated, then later you get heavier and heavier – and everything becomes more difficult. At the end, most women I know were desperate to get the baby out. But most women have some help from husbands and mothers and friends. Megan Green is pregnant with their fourth child, and Peter is doing a lot with the other children and the livestock while Megan is sick. During her third pregnancy Megan received a lot of help from her mother, Chris Cook. Even her mother-in-law, my wife Ruth, came up to help her then. Mary did not have the help of a supportive husband and encouraging neighbors – for she was pregnant without being married. You know what that means. She had been unable to keep herself pure. She shackled up with some scoundrel and now there was evidence to prove it. Furthermore, she was engaged to Joseph. The pleasures of married life were right before her, but here she could not wait even a few months. She ran off and slept with some random man. Now, Mary could explain the situation. She could have told everyone what the angel said – that she would be impregnated by the Holy Spirit and bear the future king of Israel who was also the Son of God. The text does not tell us what she said or what happened. But what would people think? What would you think if a young woman became pregnant and then claimed that the Holy Spirit did it? Women had been getting pregnant for 4,000 years, and by now everyone knew how it happens. People might think Mary used this as a good cover-up. Or maybe she ate some hallucinogenic mushrooms. Perhaps she has become a little insane. There are a number of good, plausible explanations for what is going on, but sex with the Holy Spirit is not one of them.

The text does not tell us what Mary said to her family and neighbors – if anything. Can you imagine what was going on in the village? Suppose something like this happened here? You go to the Fitness Place and run into one of your friends from First Baptist. “I hear the teenagers are having a *really good* time in your church!” You overhear while shopping in Three Bears, “Did you hear what Mary at Redeemer Church did? What a disgrace!” You are having coffee with some buddies. “So Jim, we know what Mary did. What is your church going to do about it?” And you know what? All these scenarios make perfect sense. No one would believe the truth. No one is that gullible. If someone *had* believed Mary, *she* would be the one considered insane. Even the person who loved her most, with the most at stake – Joseph – assumed that Mary had been unfaithful to him. Matthew tells us in his gospel that Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly because he loved her so much. This makes sense. It is what any loving, godly man in that culture would do. The only reason Joseph did not follow through with the divorce was the special intervention of the angel to explain everything to Joseph.

Folks, this is the hinge of history! This is the turning point of the human race. St. Athanasius explains that before Christ, the earth was enslaved by demons and ravaged by evil spirits. No one was safe, no one was at peace, no one had hope. But now, NOW! Now, when the earth is in its most desperate condition, God has announced that help is on the way. GOD is on the way! Does God care? He sure does! God had not forgotten His promises. God was not oblivious to human misery. God was poised to act, to cleanse the world of evil, to bring peace and happiness to mankind. God cares!

Fine for the world, but what about for Mary? The next nine months were difficult. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that the following nine months would be hell for her. Suffering physically, a social pariah, attempted divorce, then the horrible trip to Bethlehem on a donkey. Mary faced a form of hell never before experienced by a woman. It was fine for God to care about Israel, but what about her? By all appearances God was willing to sacrifice her for everyone else. Apparently God’s care did not extend to her.

Does God Care?

Do you ever feel this way – that God is ignoring your suffering? Do you ever think that everyone else is getting along pretty well, but you have no relief from problems? Does it seem that you have to bear

everyone else's burdens, but there is no one to bear yours? Of course you do! The reason I know this is because you are human. Life can be hard, and Satan from without, and sin from within conspire to convince us that we alone are suffering more than we deserve. Suffering is real. Perhaps the class of people here this morning who do more for others with little appreciation in return are mothers. Dads work long hours, but then they are off. Mothers work from sunup to sundown, and then in the night there are hungry, sick, and restless children to care for. If any mother thinks she works harder than anyone else, she has a pretty solid case. But Dads do not have it as easy as their wives think. When they come home after battles in the workplace, the problems of the family and house are thrust at them. The image of a man coming home to a peaceful home and resting in his recliner is largely fictitious. Children, you have almost no responsibilities, so you are perpetually happy, aren't you? No, child-size responsibilities are stressful for child-sized people. I have vivid childhood memories of struggles with Latin and English. I would agonize over my assignments and dream of the cushy life other children were blessed with. We all have our struggles, and life can be miserable at times. We claim to worship a powerful and loving God. In such times we do not feel the love and we do not see the power. It is natural to wonder if God cares – it is the human response to sorrows. And Satan and our own sinful hearts are right at hand to convince us, if possible, that we have been fools all along. They would have us believe that God is a deceiver, Christianity is a hoax, and we are miserably wasting our time worshiping this loser God.

Mary Knew God Cares

Mary was a remarkable woman, but she was not an angel. She was human, too – and I am sure the thought crossed her mind that God was giving her a raw deal. But Mary remembered two facts that kept her faith steady – facts which she included in her song. First, she remembered who God is. God is the Lord. He is the Creator of the world and the Savior of His people. The truth is that God is not a deceiver and Christianity is not a hoax. These are lies of Satan. We know that God is powerful and holy and loving. This is His nature and it is how He acts – always.

This leads to the second fact – God has a history of saving His people. When Abraham and all Mary's ancestors were in trouble, God always rescued them. God has a soft heart for those who are weak. He exerts His power on behalf of the humble and destroys the plans of the prideful. God remembered Israel in the past, and He will do so again in the future. He heard the cry of his people as they sang Psalm 85, "Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us!" Time and time again God took pity on His people when they were oppressed by enemies and overcome with troubles. And this God who never failed Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, and people too numerous to mention here will not let her down. Now that we mention Abraham and his companions, we should remember that they had their own troubles. Abraham was commanded to slay his only son. Moses was almost killed by his own people in spite of all he did for them. David had to run for his life more than once, and Elijah was hunted by a murderous queen. Come to think of it, their lives were just as trouble-plagued as Mary's, and perhaps just as much as yours. But God never abandoned them. In the end God always came through. God always does. Maybe not on our timetable or the way we want – but God always saves His people – and that is because He really does care about us. He cared about Abraham, He cared about Mary, and He cares about you.

Our epistle lesson cites Job as an example of God's compassion and mercy. Perhaps no one in the world ever suffered as much as Job. Job was one of the richest men in the world, but he lost everything. First his possessions were destroyed, then his children were killed. He might have wished God had taken his wife, but she remained to bark at him for serving God. He contracted a terrible, painful disease. His friends came over and falsely accused him. Job was in torment for a long time. But God came through. God does not treat everyone the same way, but in Job's case God restored his wealth and gave him more children. We do not know what God did with his wife. But restoration did not happen immediately. Scripture does not tell us how long Job suffered, but it was a minimum of several weeks. James cites Job as an example for us of patience as we wait for God to bless us with salvation.

Friends, when life seems hard, you are not imagining it. Sometimes we face hardships that are truly almost unbearable, and often we face lesser troubles that seem to wear us down year after year. If you wonder whether God cares about you, take heart. Everyone wonders this at some point in their lives. It means you are normal. God is not angry with you, for He understands what you are going through. God loves you, just as He loved Abraham and David and Mary and all believers before you. God is compassionate and merciful, and He will see you through your troubles. God will restore you again. But on His terms, so we must be patient.

God's Care is Cosmic

Sinclair Ferguson pointed out that although God loves each of us personally, none of us are the center of the universe. God is at work in our lives, and in the lives of billions of other people, and in spiritual powers we cannot see. The good news is that God is building a fantastic kingdom – a kingdom of peace and harmony where joy reigns and sorrow is forgotten. And we get to be a part of it! Furthermore, when Christ rose from the dead, He set in motion the process of building this kingdom. Even now, in the midst of confusion and difficulty, we see glimpses of God's future kingdom. And we play a part in this kingdom, but only a part. Millions of other people and untold angels also play a part. All-knowing God is weaving together everyone's story to bring this beautiful kingdom to completion.

We see this unfolding in the story of Job. Unseen and unknown to Job was a fierce spiritual contest between God and Satan. Satan accused Job of serving God only as payment for God's blessings. Satan's argument was that the only reason people served God was because of the goodies they got in return – not out of love or loyalty for God. The implication was that God is not worth serving unless He pays you off. Surrounded by all the angels of heaven, Satan delivered this cosmic insult against Job – and against God. Satan sought to put God to the test, but God turned the tables on him and put Satan to the test. "Remove all of the blessings I gave Job, and let's see what he does then," God said. The destruction of his possessions, the death of his children, the terrible disease were not coincidental events. They were attacks by Satan. Satan expected Job to follow his wife's advice – to curse God and die. But no, in the face of his intense misery Job refused to turn against God. Like Mary, Job knew God. Job did not know what was going on around him and in the heavenly court. He did not know that Satan was trying to discredit God. Job did not know how long his misery would last or what would be the outcome. But through long years of knowing God, Job was certain that God was ultimately in control, and that God would vindicate him in the end. Job trusted God to care for him. Cosmic events bore down hard on Job for a while, but God was there all the time, and after a little while God rescued Job from his suffering.

Do you trust God? If you do, you will need patience also. For all of us are part of God's cosmic plan. Job was a casualty in the battle between God and Satan. Mary bore God in her womb when it appeared shameful to be pregnant. And you play some cosmic role in the building of God's kingdom. Like Job, you may have no idea what God is doing with you. Like Mary you may know what God is doing, but nevertheless feel swept along by forces outside of your control. Like millions of unknown Christians, your struggles may never be recognized or appreciated. But God is using every one of us in some significant way, and God is watching over each of us. At pivotal intervals in the lives of Job and Mary God intervened to maintain His plan, which shows that He was watching all along.

God Cares for You Now

It is easy to proclaim a rosy future for the world, but does God care for me now? You bet He does! You may not know why you seem always to struggle with your school work, or why making friends is so difficult for you – why you are physically struggling, or why you have such a difficult boss – why you lost your job, or why you still cannot find a husband or wife – or why God takes your loved ones from you. You may never know these things. It is frustrating, but ultimately it does not matter. What you do know is that through all these hardships God is with you, God is helping you, God cares about you, God loves you. God's

cosmic plan is never accomplished at your expense. God is powerful enough and loving enough that He is able to build His eternal kingdom while caring for each of us.

There is a third way we know God cares about us. Mary knew God's character of compassion and she knew God's history of caring for His people. What Mary saw dimly was that God would come to save her, this time in person. For 4,000 years God had shown up to deliver His people in the form of cloud and thunder, fire and smoke, the words of prophets and the sacrifices of priest. But finally God came in person, and He has never left us. The baby Mary bore ascended physically to heaven, but He is here in Spirit. Today God cares enough for you that He gives Himself to you. When you take the bread and cup in your hands, you are grasping hold of God. This God of yours says, "I love you, my child. I died for you and I am with you in all your sorrows. I do care about you. Take me, and I will be with you forever." Amen.

Prayer

O Lord, you show us in so many ways that you are always faithful to all of your people, yet we constantly doubt you. The strongest of us waver in our faith when we are sorely tested. When we think of these things we are ashamed of ourselves, and we repent of our moments of unbelief. We are so grateful that our salvation does not depend on ourselves, but upon your great faithfulness. Thank you for pitying us in our sin and weakness. Thank you for seeking us out and calling us to your self. Thank you for giving yourself to us. Strengthen our faith and give us patience as we wait for you to finish the salvation of the world. In the name of Him who loved us to the death, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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