

AT
JESUS'
FEET

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
MARY MAGDALENE

AT
JESUS'
FEET

DOUG BATCHELOR



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THANKS TO . . .

Writing is a jealous mistress that demands undivided attention. Every line in this book represents a sacrifice laid on the altar of time made by my loving wife, Karen. I thank her for her support, patience, and encouragement as I tried to carve out precious hours to complete this work.

Thanks to Bonnie, a better secretary than anyone deserves.

In order to bring the story of Mary alive, in this book I dared to venture into a new realm of marrying biblical facts with plausible fiction, and then encapsulate it within an expository study. Because for me this was uncharted territory, I turned to Kay Rizzo for seasoned experience with editing and some creative input. Many thanks!

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PREFACE

Why a book about Mary Magdalene? Was she a great intellect like Solomon? Probably not. As beautiful as Bathsheba? The Bible is silent on this point. She was generous with her means, but she did not possess the wealth of Zacchaeus. When she thought Jesus' body had been evicted from Joseph's tomb, Mary boldly offered to carry away the Carpenter's remains. Did that imply she was physically strong, a female Samson?

Her fame doesn't come from the coveted traits the world typically associates with greatness. So what makes Mary special? This woman demonstrated three traits worthy of merit: a great love, a tenacious loyalty, and a perfect devotion. And all this springs from a life that was dirty and broken.

Most of us will never experience the wisdom and riches of Solomon or the beauty of Bathsheba, but if we let Mary teach us, like her we can be clean and new again. We can grow beyond our weaknesses, and we can possess that same tremendous love and devotion to serve Jesus here and through all eternity. With humble steps we too can follow Mary from abject shame to songs of gratitude and praise.

THE STORY AND THE STUDY

I have divided this book into two parts, the story and the study. People will lean closer and strain their ears to hear a good story, but jump and run at the first sign of study.

I chose the subject of Mary Magdalene because her life provides the best of both worlds a moving story that is also a fascinating and edifying study. The

wonderful stories of Mary in Scripture provide the perfect spiritual springboard to profound yet simple studies that will root the reader in the fundamental truths of God's Word.

You may be tempted to just read the stories of Mary and skip over the studies. That would be like coming home from the market after shopping for dinner to discover that you had left the bag with the main course at the checkout counter and brought home only the dessert.

I assure you, most of the study sections also contain some good stories.

D E B

INTRODUCTION

Writing this book has provided a unique and new challenge for me. In order to weave together the various stories and events in which Mary appears and maintain a connected flow in the areas in which the Bible is silent, I've had to tug on a few fibers of imagination and a strand or two of sanctified supposition. Wherever possible I have faithfully done my best to build upon what is revealed in Scripture and inspired commentaries.

First, let me say that I do not claim to be a prophet or the son of a prophet; however, in the five-year process of writing this manuscript, more than once I have prayed that God would help me see what happened 2,000 years ago so I could be accurate in communicating the events. There were several times when I was staring at my computer screen that I felt as if I were transported back and shown different aspects of Mary's life, as if I were there watching her drama unfold.

I am eagerly looking forward to the day when I meet the characters in this volume so that I can discover if these visions were divine revelation or overactive imagination. Perhaps a bit of both? Ultimately I am longing to meet Jesus face-to-face, who saved me, as He did Mary, from the depths of sin.

CHAPTER ONE

ADULTERY IN THE TEMPLE!

The Story

Grab her! an angry voice shouted, shattering the early-morning silence. The heavy wooden door opened and slammed against the wall with a thud, making a deeper hole in the already-damaged plaster.

Startled by this sudden invasion, Mary's heart froze. It appeared that the day she'd feared most had come.

Adulterer! Prostitute! the invaders shouted. Contempt dripped from their leering faces, like saliva from the mouths of rabid dogs. The Temple rabbis and priests poured into her small, private place of business, intent on the kill.

Her customer slipped from beneath her sheets, cast her a sheepish shrug, and drew on his clothing, acting not at all surprised by the intrusion.

This is a trap! she thought as she gazed at the men standing against the wall in the shadows, their embarrassed faces shrouded with the last remnants of night. Several were her former clients, but she knew that to identify them now would only intensify her impending punishment.

From time to time, in order to maintain a semblance of piety and to appease the devout among the

people, the scribes, lawyers, and priests would make an example of one of the out-of-town prostitutes by parading her through the streets for the gawking bystanders to curse and spit on. Then, in a mockery of pious zeal, they would violently expel their victim from the holy city through the Dung Gate in a display of artificial indignation.

I should have stayed in Magdala, Mary thought as she clutched the flimsy bedsheet. Gathering the bedding about her to hide her nakedness, she struggled to her feet.

Seize her! Don't let her get away, one of the priests snarled while another lunged for her. A third person, a Temple guard, grabbed her by her upper arm, his nails digging into her tender flesh.

Mary tried to resist, but the man's grip held fast. The terrified woman began to tremble uncontrollably. She had been suspicious when this new customer appeared at the door of her room so early in the morning. *They're going to make an example of me.*

Get her some clothes. One of the lawyers snatched her from the guard's clutches.

Humph! I say take her as she is, a scribe defended. It will be more convincing.

No, He is in the Temple, and we can't take her to the Temple like that! an older priest added with final authority as he ran his eyes over her quivering body.

One of the men leaning against the wall handed the priest a crumpled and dirty robe that had been draped over a small stool.

Put this on. Hide your shame! the priest snapped, tossing the soiled garment at the quaking woman. Grateful for even the crude covering, Mary snatched the robe from the man's outstretched hand and wrapped it about herself. Though a prostitute, she

still had a sense of modesty. Under the gaze of the lusting eyes of her accusers she covered her naked body. Her fingers trembled as she tied the belt of the dirty, oversized robe about her waist.

Upon command of the older priest, the two Temple guards seized her arms and pulled her toward the door. The rabbis stepped back, allowing the guards and the woman to pass. She exchanged a knowing glance with one of the rabbis. He lowered his eyes in shame. Revered leaders of his stature would never touch a woman with her reputation in public, that is.

The guards dragged her through the streets. Their muscular fingers bruised her olive skin. Her long, splendid hair, her pride and glory, fell tangled over her face. She struggled to maintain her footing over the rocks along the roadway. *Where are they taking me?* she wondered. Up ahead loomed the holy Temple. *The Temple?* Her panic grew. *Why the Temple?*

She could hear the shouts and curses from spectators as they passed. Curious housewives and merchants began to fall in behind this strange procession.

O God, Mary prayed desperately, please don't let Martha and Lazarus see me as I really am. A sick, hopeless laugh burst through her sobs. How can I expect the pure Holy One of Israel to hear the prayer of a filthy sinner such as I? I've gone so far, too far for God ever to forgive or hear my prayers.

A movement off to the side of the narrow street caused Mary's breath to catch in her throat. Priests were picking up some of the large stones that were intermittently scattered in front of the buildings, used to hold open the shop doors.

They are going to stone me! she gasped. A small pack of agitated dogs followed the procession up the street, yapping at the unusual early-morning

excitement. Mary wailed. They're going to stone me to death, and then those scavenging dogs will eat me as they did Jezebel!

She'd heard the story many times, growing up in a faithful Jewish home. But she'd never imagined her fate would be the same as that of Ahab's wicked queen. The guard holding her right arm gave her a brief look of sympathy, then redirected his attention to plowing through the growing sea of nosy spectators. On her left she saw a shopkeeper pick up a rock. A fish salesman on her right did the same. Mary's mind raced. Her trembling increased. Her breath came in short gasps. Spots danced before her eyes; she felt as if she were in a tunnel and thought she might faint.

Why are they taking me to the Temple? Mary asked the guard who held her right arm, her eyes filled with perplexity and pain. Why don't they stone me outside the gate?

The guard whispered out of the side of his mouth into the pretty young woman's ear: You may still have a chance. If they stone the Teacher, they will probably let you go. He's the one they want.

The Teacher! She had heard about the Teacher who went about the country healing people and blessing them. Everyone had heard of the Teacher. Soon she saw, above the crowd of curious spectators, feast worshipers, and swirling dust, the white walls of God's sanctuary, gleaming golden in the early-morning sunlight.

A cool breeze riffled her long brown hair. Mary shivered. The woman wasn't sure which frightened her more, the thought she might soon be stoned to death for adultery or that she was being paraded into the house of God half-naked and guilty of a scandalous crime.

With brute force the priests and guards pressed

through the last 100 feet leading into the courtyard, where an assembly of angry money changers and sacrifice merchants clustered at the entrance to the Temple. *That's strange*, Mary thought. *They usually bring their animals and money tables into the courtyard.*

Several agitated sacrifice salesmen accosted the priests who were accompanying Mary. He made a whip and chased us out, one snarled. He knocked over my money table!

Who gave this Galilean such authority? asked another, shaking his fist in the rabbi's face. This Man must be stopped!

With renewed determination the priests stooped their necks and headed into the Temple. Caught up in the developing drama, Mary had almost forgotten her part until an angry young woman pulled aside her veil and screeched in Mary's face. Harlot! the woman barked. Then, like a camel, she hurled a well-aimed missile of saliva in Mary's direction, striking her robe. Mary looked down at the blotch on her already soiled garment and cringed. She'd never felt so dirty.

Inside the sacred courtyard the atmosphere drastically changed. The familiar bleating of the goats and sheep, the cooing of the quail, and all the barnyard smells that a worshiper usually encountered upon entering the Temple courtyard were missing. Instead there was a sweet air of peace and silent awe. Without warning, the guards slowed their pace, then stopped. They loosened their iron grip on her upper arms. She rubbed her bruised skin.

The priests leading the procession had halted as well. In muffled tones they discussed the surprising turn of events, then straightened to regain their arrogant, pious composure. There! There He is, one of

them whispered. He pointed to a large crowd gathered around Someone sitting on the Temple steps.

The priests paused to shake the dust from the bottom of their robes and folded their hands together within the blue tasseled sleeves of their fine white garments to assume a respectable religious demeanor. Then, exchanging a smug and sinister nod at each other, they strode across the marble hall to the cluster of worshipers assembled on the steps. The Temple guards, less hostile toward the woman in their charge, followed.

As the priestly procession moved toward the heart of the crowd, the worshipers parted for them to pass, until they stood before the One who was obviously the center of the gathering.

Mary stared in awe. Although she had heard of Him everyone had she had never seen a man like this before. His features were angular, rugged, obviously not a stranger to hard work or outdoor living. Yet in His countenance she saw a gentleness, an expression of innocence mixed with wisdom and dignity. His whole frame had a perfect symmetry and balance that bore a combination of nobility and compassion. Mary had never before seen such majesty in any man, and Mary had known many men.

For some strange reason she couldn't identify, Mary felt a sense of peace and safety in His presence. Surrounded by a wall of onlookers making an escape impossible, the guards released their grip on Mary, and she collapsed, trembling, at Jesus' feet.

Mary closed her eyes and folded her arms over her head, unable to continue gazing upon this holy Man, wishing she could make this nightmare disappear. Above the din of shouts and mocking, she heard her accusers present before Jesus their lethal charge

against her. Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say? (John 8:4, 5).

The reality of her hopeless and mortifying situation crushed Mary. The terrifying array of emotions caused her to lose consciousness briefly. Crumpled on the cold marble pavement as she was, no one even knew she fainted no one except Jesus, who missed nothing about the young woman. Long before she'd entered the courtyard, long before she'd taken the first stranger to her bed, long before she'd taken the first step that would lead to her mortification, He had anticipated this very instant in time.

After a few moments Mary regained consciousness. The courtyard atmosphere had changed. It was strangely quiet. She peeked out from under her disheveled hair to see Jesus calmly tracing words in the dust of the Temple floor. At first she couldn't make out the words. She watched as He stood and said, He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first (verse 7).

She cringed, expecting a hail of stones to descend upon her. Instead she heard a thud and someone walking away.

Opening her eyes, she watched as the Teacher stooped down once more and continued writing. What was He writing? She listened to the whispers of the diminishing crowd. He was enumerating the sins of the Temple officials for all to see.

After what seemed like an eternity, the gentle hand of Jesus touched her shoulder. She brushed her hair from her face and raised her eyes. Mary saw Jesus looking back at her with infinite compassion. On His face was a slightly quizzical smile, as if He were won-

dering why she would be groveling in such an undignified manner in this holy place. Standing slowly, she gazed about and saw that the scribes and Pharisees were gone. The hypocrites who had entrapped her had fled the Temple. Then Jesus addressed her with a term of respect, Madam, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you? (see verse 10).

Mary looked around bewildered and said, No one, Lord (verse 11).

And Jesus said to her, Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more (verse 11).

Mary thought this was too good to be true. *Go and don't do it again"? I'm an adulterer! And His only rebuke is "Go and sin no more"?*

Could it be true that she was free to go? She'd been reprieved, rescued from her just punishment. Her initial instinct was to flee the place as quickly as possible, but she felt constrained by an overwhelming gratitude to thank her advocate. Willingly Mary threw herself at the Master's feet and poured out her heartfelt appreciation mingled with tears. As she did, she looked at the ground and saw the word adulterer staring back at her. Her face flamed at the polished, bright letters, a vivid, stark relief against the dust on the marble floor.

Before she could seek answers in the face of the gentle Teacher, a strong morning breeze came through the Temple court, erasing the entire catalog of sins etched in the dust. At that moment Mary felt an enormous burden of guilt lift from her soul.

The Study

JOHN 8:2-11

"Now early in the morning He came again into

the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?'

"This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.'

"And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, 'Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said to her, 'Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.'

WHO WAS MARY?

Who was this woman caught in adultery? The Bible never identifies her by name, but I believe that this was Mary Magdalene and that this story, found only in the Gospel of John, was Jesus' first encounter with her. Here she is simply referred to as a woman. But in other places in the Gospel stories Mary is also called a woman (Luke 7:37). Perhaps this is because, after this experience, Mary became a very devoted dis-

ciple, and John, recognizing this to be an extremely embarrassing situation, chose to tell her story in a more anonymous format to protect her reputation.

For the following reasons I, along with many New Testament scholars, believe that Mary Magdalene and the Mary of Bethany mentioned in the Gospels are the same Mary. Here are a few reasons:

1. Neither was married.
2. Both had bad reputations.
3. Both had money.
4. Both had the same name.
5. Both were with Jesus, but their names are never mentioned together.

Texts that help verify this view include:

1. Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb (Matt. 28:1). The other Mary is understood to be the mother of James and Joses, and the wife of Clopas.

2. Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us? (Mark 6:3).

3. Among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons (Matt. 27:56).

4. There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome (Mark 15:40).

The name Mary is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Miriam*, meaning bitter. And in our first introduction to Mary, we find her in bitter shame. But here is the bigger question: How did the name Mary Magdalene come to take on such a connotation of im-