

Mary Magdalene

A flexible, devoted and passionate follower of Jesus

In gratitude to God for missionaries Heleen Voorhoeve [Egypt] and Beryl Harris [Zaire] who, for more than half a century, have modeled these virtues for us.
Your lives, dear sisters, are an inspiration to us.

We usually think of Jesus walking, teaching and healing while surrounded by his twelve apostles. Yet, as we look closer at the Gospel accounts, we discover many women who loved Jesus and showed active interest in what he said and did. Some, like sisters Martha and Mary, offered Him warm hospitality; others, like the Samaritan woman, brought a crowd for Him to teach. Sometimes a grateful woman would pour perfume on Him, or wash his tired and dirty feet. Mary, his mother, stood by Him when she could. Others, like Joanna and Susanna, followed Jesus and the Twelve, and helped “to support them out of their own means” (Luke 8:1-3). Among all these wonderful women, I feel that the life and character of one of these shines the brightest: Mary called Magdalene. Have you wondered why the resurrected Christ chose to show Himself alive to Mary Magdalene before showing himself alive to anybody else? (Mark 16:9). There is something special about her. She shines bright when compared with the attitudes and the behavior of the apostles. Through her actions she had much to teach them. She can also be a model for us today.

1. Mary Magdalene tormented by demons

Not much is said about the background of this woman. The name “Magadala” means “a tower”. Perhaps some called her Magdalene because of her stability or her strength of character. But there was a town on the west side of the sea of Galilee called Magdala (some maps have variant spellings). It is more likely that this Mary was distinguished from many others in that she originally came from this town. It was fairly common in those days to identify a woman in relation to some relative, such as “Joanna the wife of Chuza” and “Mary the mother of James and Joses” (Luke 8:3; Matthew 27:56). Mary Magdalene is mentioned at least 12 times by name, but with no family connection. To some this would suggest that Mary Magdalene was an unmarried woman. Yet there is something more telling about her past, and that is her connection with demons.

As Jesus travelled, we read that “some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases” followed Him, and among them was “Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out” (Luke 8:1-3). Sometimes evil spirits cause diseases. When the demon is gone, good health returns. But notice, if demons “came out”, there must have been a time when they “came in”. From what I have observed here in Colombia, demons are able to seriously torment both Christians and non-

Christians alike. But there is usually some historic reason or “event” which allow demons to “come in”, indwell or take possession of a non-Christian. In most cases, you will discover a family history of witchcraft, serious drug abuse, incest, prostitution, and the like. If you have met someone possessed or tormented by a demon, you will well understand the fear, insecurity and helplessness lived by Mary Magdalene. It is not uncommon for such desperate people to consider suicide. And it is in this condition that she meets Jesus. Demons don’t normally just “come out”. They may hide inside for a while. In the case of the demon-possessed man in Mark 5, the expelling of his demons was more a process than an immediate event. In the case of Mary Magdalene, Mark describes what Jesus did as “out of whom he had driven seven demons” (Mark 16:9). I suggest that an understanding of this background is key in understanding the unyielding passion and tenacious faithfulness with which she followed her Master. What is the calibre of your devotion to Jesus? Could your Christianity be described as a “good habit” or a “hobby” rather than a “passion”? Jesus used the presence of another sinful woman to make clear this spiritual reality: “He who has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47). Each Christian has been forgiven a vast debt. We, like Mary Magdalene, should also love passionately. Yet we take our sin to lightly. We come to Christ with little urgency, without anguish, without despair. We see ourselves as fairly good citizens who just need a little push to get to heaven. It is simply impossible for Pharisees, and their modern equivalents, to love like Mary Magdalene.

2. Mary Magdalene followed and served Jesus

Once Jesus had made her completely free, she followed and served Him. Perhaps you have come across one of those enthusiastic and ever active Christians. They just love to serve. Maybe you are one. Well, Mary Magdalene provides two simple and powerful lessons: (1) To serve Him as He wants, you must first be free. Too many saints try to serve Him while still bound to sad memories, a complex, an unforgiving spirit, bitterness or something else. We get used to living our Christianity under such a grey cloud. May I suggest you stop your service and seek full freedom? Freedom in Christ is not an academic doctrine; it is a real experience available to every believer. (2) To serve Him as He wants, you must follow Him. The fact that you are born again and that you are busy in Christian activities is not enough.

We must be willing to serve the Lord on our own, yet most of Christian service is carried out in teams. Our Lord Jesus formed an apostolic team; Paul traveled and served together with others. We also find Mary Magdalena serving Jesus in a team of women. Teams are usually made up of different types and personalities and this can easily become a reason for problems. You may be surprised how many conflicts and tensions exist among missionaries who have given their life to serve the same Master! Even the apostolic team had its moments of internal stress and conflict (Mark 9:34). Mary Magdalene was not a loner, neither did she distance herself from team service, yet Scripture does not involve her in any situation of conflict. She loved with passion, yet was flexible enough to work with “many others” (Luke 8:3). Mary Magdalene shared her Saviour and her service with a number of different types of people:

a. Men (Luke 8:1). The Twelve were specially chosen by Jesus. They were sometimes a bit bossy and critical of others. The eyes of Mary Magdalene, like

the eyes of most other sensitive women, must have noticed this. There is no evidence that she competed with these men neither did she enter in conflict with them. She was active and content in her supportive role.

- b. Rich women.** Among those who served were women like “Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household” (Luke 8:3). Women from wealthy backgrounds are often used to having it their way and telling others what to do. They are not always easy to work with. There is no evidence that Mary Magdalene entered in conflict with such.
- c. Political women.** Jesus had called two brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee, a fisherman. They joined the Twelve (Mark 3:13-19). Their mother was also among those women who followed and served Jesus (Matthew 27:55, 56). I think she must have been a bit of a pushy woman. When the other ten apostles were distracted, she brought James and John to Jesus, knelt before Him and said “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at you left in your kingdom”. When the other disciples heard about this, it caused tension among them (Matthew 20:21). Jesus renamed these two young men “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17), and I sometimes wonder if this name had something to do with the temperament of their mother! Yet again, we find no record of any conflict between Mary Magdalene and this woman. She was prepared to “share” Jesus even with complicated women.
- d. Relatives.** The apostle John records that Mary Magdalene was present at the cross together with the mother of Jesus and an aunt of Jesus (John 19:25). The mother and the aunt had close family ties with Jesus which Mary Magdalene did not have. Family connections can easily cause friction in teams, yet Mary Magdalene loved and served her Master with no evidence of competition or jealousies. Can you work happily with those who think they are closer to Jesus or more “spiritual” than yourself?

3. Mary Magdalene stands by the cross

One of the events Mary Magdalene is much remembered for is her standing by the cross of Jesus. For some, her standing there may be considered a passive act, something fairly insignificant. Take a closer look. Mary Magdalene, together with other women, had walked from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jesus was taken captive on Thursday evening and these women must have stayed awake all Thursday night wondering what would happen to their Lord. Can you imagine what was going on in their hearts as they heard the people cry “crucify him”? On Friday morning they followed Jesus to Calvary. They saw him being nailed and raised on that cross. They found no moral support in the Twelve; in fact, one of them had betrayed Him and another had publicly denied Him. If you have ever been in a hospital watching a loved one suffer, you can well imagine that Mary Magdalene must have been, at this point, emotionally exhausted.

But Matthew records a few more events: to add to the pain, “those who passed by hurled insults at him (27:39). Yet Mary Magdalene was not ashamed of her Lord. Then, starting at midday and lasting for 3 hours, “darkness came over all the land” (27:45). When I was a boy, I recall experiencing a total solar eclipse here in

Colombia. During that warm afternoon we lived a few minutes of darkness. Apart from some dogs hauling and a few confused chickens preparing to roost, I remember a strange coldness. During the three hours of darkness, Mary Magdalene, together with those other women, must have felt tired but also quite cold. Then they heard their loved One cry out again in a loud voice and die (27:50). “At that moment... the earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open” and some dead people came to life (27:51, 52). Earthquakes cause panic, not to mention open tombs and the risen dead. We are even told that the centurion and his team of professional killers “were terrified” (27:54). What kept Mary Magdalene there by that cross? Why didn’t she flee with the other disciples? I think her background made the difference: “He who has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47). Deep felt gratitude powered her devotion.

Before we move on, perhaps we could ask how our faith and devotion to Christ responds to injustice, pain and **suffering**. Do the unanswered “why” questions move us away from Christ? How does our Christian experience respond to laughter and **ridicule**? Do we, like Peter, distance ourselves from public identification with Jesus? And what about those times of **darkness**, when the future seems so uncertain. Do we remain standing firm close to our Lord? Sometimes the unexpected **death** of a loved one shakes our world. Sometimes there are other **earthquakes** (like unemployment, divorce, church division) that move the foundations of our stability. Sometimes there are unexpected **resurrections** of long forgotten health or financial problems. Like Mary Magdalene, confused, hurting, cold and tired, let’s remain close to our Lord.

4. Mary Magdalene watched Jesus being buried

Jesus died after 3pm on Friday afternoon. By sun set the Sabbath would begin, so there were only a few hours to prepare the body of Jesus and put it in a tomb. “As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph... Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body... Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth” (Matthew 27:57-61). From the apostle John we learn that this Joseph was not alone: “He was accompanied by Nicodemus” who “brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen” (John 19:38-42). While this took place, “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb” (Matthew 27:61).

Would you have criticized Mary Magdalene if she had gone home after the crucifixion? Hadn’t she already gone way beyond the call of duty? In fact, now that Jesus was dead and there was little else that she could do, it would be quite reasonable for her to depart and seek some rest. But Mary Magdalene doesn’t depart. She follows the body until the large stone is rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb. A loving and devoted heart always does more than is strictly necessary. It walks that extra mile. It goes beyond duty. Do you measure your service? Do you compare your degree of devotion with that of others? A heart truly in love with Christ does not bother with such comparisons!

5. Mary Magdalene returned to the sepulchre

“Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise” Mary Magdalene and two other women “were on the way to the tomb” (Mark 16:1-3). Are you one of those who get up early in the morning? Of course, we can mediate on God’s Word and enjoy communion with Christ any time during the day, but there is something special about the early morning. Our mind is fresh. We are at our best. We are setting the tone for the day ahead. You can find references to Abraham, Joshua, Gideon and the Lord Himself, getting up early in the morning. Judging by biographies of interesting men and women of God, nearly invariably they are early risers. And what made these tired women get up early? The angel at the tomb knew. He said “I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified”. And then he added the good news: “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said” (Matthew 28:5, 6).

You may have noticed that love and passion are not always logical and rational. A few months ago we offered a neighbour a regular arrangement to take her child to school together with our children in our car. This would save time and expense. To our surprise, the mother declined our offer. “I enjoy dropping off and picking up my little boy” she said. When a sinful woman poured an expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet, some of the disciples became indignant: “Why this waste?” (Matthew 26:8). This was not a rational use of resources. Mary Magdalene and some other women had purchased spices to anoint the body of Jesus. They got up and left early in the morning, and on the way “they asked each other, ‘who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’” (Mark 16:3). Good question! Would the Roman guards cooperate? Unlikely! Perhaps they should have discussed this before purchasing the spices! But their mind and heart were on Jesus, not on such technicalities. Love always finds a way.

On that sad Friday, after leaving the body of Jesus in the tomb, Mary Magdalene and other women “went home and prepared spices and perfumes” (Luke 23:55, 56). Wasn’t this also a bit of a waste? Why such an expense? Personally, I would be inclined to forgo the spices and the perfume. What you put on a dead body doesn’t really matter, does it? The women knew Nicodemus and Joseph had already wrapped the body with “about seventy-five pounds of spices” (John 19:38-42). Wasn’t that enough? But a loving and a devoted heart does not reason like that. It didn’t matter what others had done, they wanted to express their own appreciation. So many Christian songs have been composed, why bother composing a new one? So many Christian books and tracts have been written, why make the effort and write another one? So many rich Christians give generously to the Lord’s work, why bother with my small contribution? So many eloquent evangelists explain the gospel on radio and television, why should I bother giving out some tracts? So many large organizations help the needy people in this world, so why bother with just one emigrant family that arrived in our neighbourhood? Our contribution may be small, yet a loving and a devoted heart does not reason like that. Like Mary Magdalene, we also want to give to Jesus something that smells good. “Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16). Such acts of ours are also called “a fragrant offering... pleasing to God” (Philippians 4:18).

6. Mary Magdalene met the risen Christ

As pointed out earlier, Mary Magdalene had gone to the sepulchre “looking for Jesus” (Matthew 28:5). It is not easy to get up early when tired. Close to the sepulchre they experienced another “violent earthquake” as the angel of the Lord rolled back the stone (Matthew 28:2). You may have some difficulties on the way, but everyone who truly seeks Jesus eventually finds him. “‘You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you’, declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 29: 13, 14). In the gospel of John, we find the moving encounter between Mary Magdalene and the risen Christ. The disciples visited the empty tomb “and went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying” (20:10, 11). She was left alone in her pain. The One her heart loved was missing. In her anguish, she seems unaware that two “angels” were speaking to her. In her state of distress she looks at Jesus standing next to her and does not recognize Him. It was only as she heard the Lord’s warm and familiar voice call her name that she broke out of her sad trance and worshipped Him.

Sometimes our natural distress can distance us from the Lord’s intended blessing. The Lord may be trying to use fellow Christians, even angels to comfort our hearts. We **listen** to their words, we know they are true, yet we do not let them reach our soul. We **see** evidence of the Lord’s kindness about us, in our head we know the Lord is near, yet in our pain we do not allow Him to cheer our heart. Are you alone? Are you hurting? The same Lord Jesus who felt for Mary Magdalene also feels for you. He also knows and warmly calls your name. He invites you to take your eyes off your sad situation and to look up at Him. He wants you to love and worship Him.

7. Mary Magdalene’s report was questioned

When Jesus was tempted by the devil, He answered “**Worship** the Lord your God and **serve** him only” (Luke 4:8). After worship comes service. The Lord Jesus then instructs Mary Magdalene to go and take a message to the other disciples, who were “mourning and weeping” (Mark 16:10). The Lord was also concerned about them. When we open ourselves to be comforted by the Lord, He usually gives us enough grace so that we may also comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4). Mary Magdalene was very special to the Lord Jesus, but she was not the only one.

Mary wiped her tears away and obeyed the Lord. She did exactly what He told her to do, and she did it immediately. How did the disciples react to her message? “When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it” (Mark 16:11). Please imagine this encounter. With joy and passion Mary Magdalene shares the good news, and the disciples simply don’t believe her. Have others called into question the truthfulness of your report? Do you now what it is like to be under suspicion of distorting the truth? How did she react to this emotional and very uncomfortable situation? Did she rebuke the disciples for being sexist in refusing a female witness? Did she swear like Peter to add weight to her words? (Matthew 26:74). Did she write her report down and circulate it for future evidence? Did she storm out in protest? No, no, no and no. Mary Magdalene simply did what Jesus asked her to do, and left their reaction with the Lord. The Lord noticed this tense situation. We read that “later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he **rebuked** them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who

had seen him after he had risen" (Mark 16:14). Then, as always, the Lord stands by and vindicates His servants. There is a saying here in Colombia that says "Sooner or later a drowned body floats". The Lord ensures that the truth eventually comes to light (Luke 12:1-3). Are others casting doubt on your motives, words or actions? Do you feel you are being miss-understood? Like Mary Magdalene, speak the truth calmly and clearly. Worship Him happily. And continue active in what the Lord has given you to do. Opposition never justifies bitterness or paralysis.

Conclusion

After I gave a message in a local church in Germany a couple of years ago, a young brother asked how to obtain "passion for Jesus". Mary Magdalene shows us the way. [1] Come to terms with your own sinfulness. Unless you truly feel what Christ has done (and does) for you, you will always "love little". [2] Keep on following Christ, not the disciples, not the local church, not historic godly figures, not even doctrines. We must follow Christ with others, but we don't follow others. [3] Don't let your heart get divided. Sweets and snacks take away a healthy appetite. If you follow religious conventions and strive to fulfill human expectations, you will find enough satisfaction to lose your appetite for the real thing. At the end of Joshua's life, his advice to the nation of Israel was: "**Take great heed** therefore unto your souls, that ye **love** Jehovah your God" Joshua 23:11 [JND translation].

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