

A Little Story

I don't know why it always surprises me that when I choose something, I often find God has also somehow chosen it for me. When I selected the Magnificat for my next *Bible Study Evangelista Show* study series, I was wading into unfamiliar territory. Mary is a familiar friend to most Catholics, but as a convert from denominationalism, I had a "Meh!" notion toward Jesus' mother.

As I began to do the research for this series, however, I found my heart slowly changing as I made a startling discovery: *No one could love Jesus' mother more than he does.* And he wanted me (and he wants *you*) to get to know her the way he knows her. I was humbled when this realization first hit me, because I realized he must have been a little put off by my ambivalence toward his mom! Experiencing her gentle "motherliness" has been a profound and beautiful gift.

I can't wait to share more of my story with you. For now, I'll say this: Mary was (and is) not who I imagined, some quiet, shy, naïve teenager who stumbled into the Virgin birth as though she fell into a rain puddle. She *was made* for it—and for him. And she had to be fierce to mother him.

Even now, Mary retains her utter uniqueness, because she alone can be at the same time mother and disciple of the Lord. When we draw close to her and enter into her yes as fellow Christians, we allow her to gather us up in her motherly mantle. We are pulled up into the communion of love—like a big hug—communicated through

the man who “gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25) and for each of us, even unto death on a cross.

Though I was unaware of it when I first began this study, I came to see the Magnificat as a personal gift from Jesus, preserved for us by the Holy Spirit for millennia: this ancient canticle shows us the many ways that Jesus’ mother Mary is a very special gift from him to the whole church.

Hear the Heartbeat of the Church

I like to tell people that I offer “Bible study spinach that tastes like cake.” Mary’s joyful response to the revelation of the Incarnation, recorded in Luke’s gospel, is the heartbeat of the liturgical and devotional life of the Church, revealed in both the Rosary (in the Annunciation and Visitation Mysteries) and daily office (at Vespers).

While the Magnificat’s origins have been the subject of academic debate, Mary approaches us as a mother, not an academic. Therefore, our exploration of the Magnificat will be more meditative than critical. We approach Mary as an icon of every soul seeking its relationship to God and see that she invites us to a particular relationship with the Holy Spirit that is revealed through her song. As such, I think you might find studying her Magnificat with me to be as nourishing as spinach and maybe even as tasty as cake.

Whether you are reading *Exalted* on your own or as part of a group, this book is similar in format to all my previous studies: full of scripture *and* study, it’s perfect for individuals *and* groups, whether you are engaging this material on your own or with others. I invite you now to consider marking your book as you read and to make notes in a journal of some sort as you go. Perhaps

more importantly, I hope you will read with a Bible close by so you can underline or highlight verses that leap off the page at you, if you are amenable to doing so.

Expect each chapter to include the following:

- A Review: “Repetition is the mother of learning,” as they say, so we spend some time revisiting each chapter in a concise way.
- An Invitation: This section applies the scriptures and the chapter to our own lives.
- A God Prompt: Here I offer a LOVE the Word scripture exercise to help you get personally and directly in touch with God. Each exercise targets a particular type of personality or temperament, so you might find yourself drawn to some of these exercises more than others, and that’s okay.

Let's Begin

Exalted breaks down the Magnificat, line by line. This ancient canticle is the fruit of Mary’s prayer and a model of praise for the Church, as is illustrated in its inclusion in the daily office and at Mass. Together, verse by verse, we will explore how Mary teaches that each of us is called to be a magnificat, too: to be so fully what we were created to be that our own lives give unique witness to the power of God in the world.

Is it a surprising thought, that God desires to exalt you in a way that you were specially created for, and that can glorify him? I hope you will ponder that thought as you read. Consider that the suggestion could be a special invitation from the Holy Spirit to go deeper with him.

What if the Holy Spirit is inviting you to a more fruitful and powerful prayer life? What if this invitation involves knowing Mary in a way you never considered before? What if the nature of that invitation is contained and preserved in scripture in the words of the first person to incarnate a complete yes to him? Could her Magnificat be the key to your deepest longings and desires?

“Let it be done to me . . .” Amen. And so, let’s begin.

Introductory Group Questions

If you are reading *Exalted* as part of a group, here are a few questions to keep in mind as you finish the introduction. (You can also use them as journal prompts, if you are doing the book on your own.)

- As you study the cover and title of the book, what are your impressions? What are your thoughts about Mary? Why do you think her prayers were and are so powerful?
- After you have read through the introduction together, either silently or aloud as a group, discuss: What do you hope to take away from this study? What do you want the Holy Spirit to do in your life?
- In your Bible, thumb through Luke 1 for a moment or two, paying special attention to the chapter and paragraph headings in bold print. Is there anything that strikes you about the sequence of events?
- Based on what you see in the scripture text, try to imagine Mary’s relationship to the Holy Spirit. What does it suggest about the relationship between personal holiness and intimacy with the Spirit?
- Do you ever find yourself reluctant to relate to Mary as your spiritual mother? What, if anything, makes you hesitate? What makes you most uncomfortable about her? How

do you hope or anticipate your relationship with the Holy Spirit to change as you work through this book?

Conclude the session by praying the Our Father.

Blessed Is She Who Believed

(Luke 1:45)

Setting the Stage for the Magnificat

The prayerful young peasant hugs her secret close, a secret so powerful that it has taken root inside her and become incarnate as a brand-new life. That holy moment must be an unspeakable thrill for Mary. She touches the reality timidly and turns her encounter with the angel over and over in her mind.

As the miles pass on her way through the hill country to visit Elizabeth, Mary considers the significance—and consequence—of God’s invitation through the angel from every possible angle, replaying the words repeatedly, jumping up and down and twirling around in her soul until she’s dizzy with the implications. As the reality of her supernatural motherhood sets in, from the angel to the Magi, she is continually “pondering . . . in her heart” (Lk 2:19).

Arriving at last at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary embraces her cousin, who reveals that she too knows and understands and *believes* the unspeakable thing that has happened. "Blessed is she who believed," Elizabeth says to her, affirming at once the fulfillment of her own dreams *and* those of Mary (Lk 1:45). Both their longings have been miraculously answered.

This was the moment, the cosmic set-up, the *invitation*. Then and there the Spirit, who had been whispering to her all the way up into the hill country of Judea, erupted in an exalted canticle of prophecy and praise. A riot of poetry fizzed out of her, spreading out in a pool of song that ran up the sides of the hills of history like a wave. We know it now as the Magnificat, Mary's Song, which in time became the song of the Church.

My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has regarded the low estate of his
 handmaiden.
 For behold, henceforth all generations will
 call me blessed;
 for he who is mighty has done great things
 for me,
 and holy is his name.
 And his mercy is on those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm,
 he has scattered the proud in the imagination
 of their hearts,
 he has put down the mighty from their
 thrones,
 and exalted those of low degree;
 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.
(Lk 1:46–55)

Mother of Dreams

Perhaps because of the way I was brought up, and perhaps even due to mothering my own boys, I have a deep regard for motherhood. Great mothers must be fully present; they must intuit, nurture, console, protect, direct, correct, encourage, teach, and suffer. And at times, in order to do these things, it is sometimes necessary to relinquish some of their own dreams along the way. Sometimes those dreams return to us—and sometimes they don't.

I meet people all the time who think dreams are childish, who gave up on their dream long ago, who think God forgot to give them a dream at all, or who are about to leave their dream behind because the setbacks seem continuous and overwhelming.

I find this reality deeply sad, in part because I know that many people have un- or underdeveloped, wasted potential because no one ever raises them up or encourages them to pursue what God wants most for them, what he made them for. Often this lack of support manifests itself as a kind of wall that creeps up and prevents them from growing into their fullest potential, that is, their unique way of being a magnificat. Many such individuals have never had a mother who modeled for them what it really means to “magnify the Lord.” But it could be that, like Mary, your dream is meant to somehow magnify the Lord. How?

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your vindication as the light, and your right as the noonday. (Ps 37:4–6)

Mary shows us through her Magnificat that when a desire has been created in us by God, we can magnify him through the successive, determined acts of simple and humble trust through which he brings it to fruition in us: “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you” (1 Pt 5:6).

That pathway from humility to exaltation is every believer’s mission and call. Each of us has been created to do something great for the kingdom of God. Each of us has the potential to reflect God and to bring him glory. Not only is Mary a big dreamer, she reflects and glorifies God to the nth degree, too. She “magnifies the Lord” in a way that resonates, generation after generation, through her son and through the scriptures.

She magnifies . . . because her humble faith brings forth fruit.

Mary is not alone in this, of course. The Bible reminds us, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

Surely every Jewish woman in the land of Israel longed to be the chosen one, and every woman assumed the prophesied Messiah would arrive in the usual way of married men and women. If, as tradition suggests, Mary was consecrated to God and was to remain a virgin, part of that sacrifice entailed relinquishing something that was every Jewish woman’s greatest hope: to be the mother of the Messiah, the savior of her people.

And yet, even as Mary relinquished that dream, God had prepared her for something greater than anything

she—or anyone else—could have ever imagined: virgin motherhood. She *believed* his word to her so completely it took root within her; she gave birth to the Word in the world, and he remains forever and ever. Glorious. Marvelous. Miraculous. Breathless.

This most holy, sacred moment in human history is the Incarnation, and it is why we bow deeply during the words of the Creed in our worship liturgy: “By the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the Virgin Mary and became man.” It is the moment when Mary’s Creator was conceived within her, the moment when the new covenant took flesh within Mary. It was for this reason the Church Fathers declared her *Theotokos*, meaning *God-bearer* or *Mother of God*. And so it was fitting and perfectly natural that the Gospel for which heaven had been so long preparing should break upon the world amid the harmonies of music.

Becoming Magnificat

God is calling you, too, to be a kind of magnificat. Obviously not in the same way as Mary, who was uniquely called and prepared to be the mother of the Lord. Your life should manifest God’s power according to *your* calling. However, if you trust him for all things and in all things the way Mary did, he *will* exalt you, raising you up so you can thrive. The process may require that you face greater challenges than you ever guessed as you are stripped of the things that weigh you down and prevent you from following God without hindrance.

Why would we ever want to go through all it takes for God to develop all that is promising in us? Because we will never know what it means to “magnify the Lord”

until we are tapping into and living from our fullest spiritual potential. God wants to do far more surprising things with your life than you might ever imagine.

Mary shows us that we do not follow God's call by walking a straight and unobstructed line; it always involves obstacles, roadblocks, and adversaries. These are part of the process of formation.

As I will share further on in the book, Mary's Magnificat showed me that as I grow in faith and become more and more the person God created me to be, I am *becoming* a magnificat. You are, too. Her song shows us what that means and how God accomplishes it in each of us. Often it begins with a dream or longing, one that has been in us for as long as we can remember, a desire of the heart (Ps 37:4) that God himself may have given us. Mary's longing was to be the mother of the Messiah.

Medieval theologian and logician St. Thomas Aquinas was also a supporter of dreams, it seems. He says magnanimity is the soul's aspiration to bigger dreams, the jewel, or "ornament of all the virtues," because the magnanimous person seeks the bigger dream, and has the courage to become worthy of it: "Magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God."¹

What can Mary teach me about the magnanimity of giving birth to my own dream, about becoming a magnificat? First, Mary's Magnificat teaches me the key is intimacy with the Holy Spirit.

Intimacy with the Spirit . . .

The Magnificat is inspired by the Holy Spirit, born in the depth of Mary's heart, and leaves her lips to become a permanent testimony to the Holy Spirit's action in human

lives. Mary has an utterly unique, fertile, and practical relationship with the Holy Spirit. Her union with God is so complete and full that it reaches into every part of who she is; the Holy Spirit “overshadows,” overtakes, or embraces her so completely that she brings forth a physical manifestation of her union with God, a union that exceeds all imaginings.

She is actively receptive to everything the Lord offers to her at every moment of her life. She receives and ponders. She consents and cooperates. She treasures things in her heart and then expresses herself outwardly. She says yes with her spirit and becomes the Lord’s handmaid and bride. She offers up her entire being, body and soul, to become the Mother of God. Over and over, her repeated yeses—with no conditions, limitations, preconceptions, or demands—open her up to newer unfathomable vistas. First, Mother of God. Then Mother of the Church. Then every single Christian’s spiritual mother in Christ, in every millennia of salvation history. Ultimately, queen of apostles, angels, Christians. Queen of Heaven. Forever.

Above all, Mary’s lifelong yes is a complete fullness of grace. Mary does not choose to be mother. It is the Lord who calls her. Born to bring us grace through the fruit of her womb, Mary was created by God with every perfection she possesses and displays, each given to her in order to prepare her for that lifelong yes. By God’s overwhelming action she was made the participant of a grace so *full* that his gifts continue, extended through her to the whole world in every generation.

The nature and degree to which God exalted Mary was not clear to her until heaven and becomes increasingly clear to the Church as Jesus reveals her role in the millennia after her assumption. Our own exaltation will follow the same pattern. Mary was a diaper changer,

laundry doer, dinner maker, religion teacher, and spouse. Mary was as normal as any of us. Her secret is that humility like hers in the context of these daily, unremarkable tasks unleashes the power of the Holy Spirit in the world.

... Foreshadows the Spirit's Work in Us

Although Mary occupies an utterly unique role in history, God is still at work in the world today the way he was with her: Mary reveals to every soul the receptivity and responsiveness God wants from us. In this way, she is a symbol of the whole Church. The Holy Spirit simply waits for my unconditional assent to begin developing my full potential, according to God's design. Only then am I able to see what I am capable of doing, with his help. And yet that potential will only bear fruit as long as I continue to surrender to that movement of the Spirit.

So who is the Holy Spirit to me? How do I draw close to him? Do I want to?

God created you to know and love him, as only you can, through your unique personality, temperament, events, circumstances, and duties in life. Through the Magnificat we see that those who depend solely upon themselves prevent God's action in and through them. So it's not so much "What do I want to do for God?" but "What does he want to do with me?" This last question is something we can discover only if we are intimate with the Holy Spirit in prayer.

Mary as the Model of Intimate Prayer

Bl. Anne Catherine Emmerich was the eighteenth-century German stigmatist² whose visions provided