

DISCUSSION/ REFLECTION / BOOK GROUP QUESTIONS

What was Mary of Nazareth really like?

The Bible gives us hints and clues, but much is left unwritten. My hope is that by raising questions each one of us can each reach a deeper understanding. The goal isn't for us to end up with identical conclusions. All of these questions are designed to be open-ended. The responses are meant to be personal, not right or wrong. (The story is narrated by a dog. This should make it crystal-clear that this is a work of imagination, not a claim of black-and-white fact.)

My hope is that If we can “walk a mile in her sandals” and see Mary’s familiar story with fresh eyes, we may find a new personal connection to God’s love and the gift of life we all share.

Sometimes this kind of connection happens when we agree with what we read. But sometimes it’s when we say, “No, that’s not it,” and we start digging into what bothers us about it. Either way, as long as we are respectful of one another we can grow “in wisdom and in grace.”

This guide can be used for personal reflection or for a 4-session book group. There is an added section at MarysDog.com for an optional 6-session group.

To print out these questions, for questions for teen groups, or for alternative questions, please go to www.MarysDog.com.

Week 1- Forward, Preface, and Day One (Chapters 1-9)

In a moment of silence, let us be open to guidance and grace.....

Amen

1. Even though most people in her society shy away from dogs, Mary reaches out right away and pets the animal. Does this tell you anything about the way the author sees her? Does this image ring true for you, or do you see her with different qualities? How does this relate to our relationship with the rest of creation?
2. In this book Mary's parents have trouble accepting the reality of her angel and his message. How did you relate to their response? Would you have written her parents' reactions differently? How would you yourself react if a teen in your family wanted to go off on a long trip all alone after a similar claim?
3. Mary interprets her sickness in the swaying wagon as a sign from God about the truth of the angel's message. Does it seem to you that God speaks to people through such everyday signs, or just through major events, or maybe not at all? Can you recall any such "signs" in your own life?
4. Mary asks Ethan about his life and then listens carefully to his story. Have you ever had anyone in your own life who would listen to you with this kind of patience? Have you ever been able to offer this gift to someone else?

End with a prayer for the lonely, and thanksgiving for all we've been given.

BONUS ACTION: EATING LIKE MARY

Share a snack in silence and slowly savor the flavors and textures. Give it plenty of time, and then share your responses.

Week 2: Day 2 and Day 3 (Chapters 10-17)

In a moment of silence, let us be open to guidance and grace.....

Amen

1. When the young man tries to grab Mary, Tobias pushes him away. Were you surprised at the idea of Mary being threatened by violence? The young man misinterpreted the fact that Mary was walking alone. Afterward, when Mary is silent, Tobias wonders if she might be praying for the young man. What is your response?

2. Mary is not afraid to reach out and touch Levanah, even though she is clearly “impure” by the standards of their religion. Would you have written this differently? Would you yourself honestly want to walk next to Levanah?

3. As Levanah tells her story, do your feelings for her change in any way? Does it make sense to you that Mary shares the secret of her own pregnancy with this stranger? What do you think of both Mary and this “woman of the world” being teenagers?

4. After Levanah leaves, Mary feels that she’s failed her. She trusts God, but she’s afraid she didn’t do enough on her own part. Does it ring true to you that Mary would feel this way? Do you yourself ever feel this way?

End with a prayer for people who are outcasts, and thanksgiving for all we’ve been given.

BONUS ACTION: SEEING LIKE MARY

During the next week, take at least one walk or spend time at a window and truly see what’s in front of you: a cloud, a leaf, a squirrel, something specific. Allow yourself to just gaze, with no words or practical thoughts.

Week 3: Day 4 (Chapters 18-26)

In a moment of silence, let us be open to guidance and grace.....

Amen

1. Levanah believes what Mary told her, so she transforms herself into Esther and begins a new life. What immediate changes do you see in her? Do you think this kind of change is possible in the real world? Is there any way we can support someone who's trying to make such a change?

2. The young man who tried to grab Mary returns, but now she understands him in a different way. Does that seem realistic to you? Have you ever struggled to explain yourself to someone? Has anyone in your life tried to get you to change your view of them?

3. Mary tells Abraham he has to choose between his love and his fear, because he can't have both. Do you agree with her? How do we experience love versus fear in our own lives or in our world?

4. Tobias launches himself at the robber but decides in mid-air to injure rather than kill him. Can you trace any steps, large or small, that led him to this decision? His Master and Mary have different responses to this action. Have you ever had two people you cared about react to you in conflicting ways?

End with a prayer for those who live in fear, and thanksgiving for all we've been given.

BONUS ACTION: Think of someone you don't approve of and try to see that person through eyes of compassion.

Week 4: Days 5, 6, and Journey's End (Chapters 27-34)

In a moment of silence, let us be open to guidance and grace.....
Amen

1. Rebekah (the Lady) finally shares her story and ends by telling Mary that that "one good laugh" was all she needed to free herself from her self-pity and resentment. Does this ring true to you? Does laughter have anything to do with how you see your own self or the world?

2. Even though he loves Mary, when the troop of Roman cavalry rides by Tobias is tempted to follow them. The past still draws him back. Can you put yourself in his place? Do you agree that change is hard?

3. When Mary first sees Elizabeth up above her on the hillside and says her name, Tobias responds, "There is such raw longing in her voice that I no longer want to hold her back." He loves her, but he lets her go. Have you ever had to let go of someone you love?

4. In King Herod's courtyard Tobias risks everything by showing his vulnerability. Did this scene mean anything to you personally? Were you surprised by Jeremiah's response? Did you imagine Jeremiah could ever let Tobias go by sending him to Mary?

End with a prayer for those trapped in their past, and thanksgiving for all we've been given.

BONUS ACTION: Try to picture yourself holding in your hands something you truly value. Then open your hands and imagine releasing your hold. Remain in silence with your hands open for as long as you want, then say, with Mary, "Amen. Yes. Amen."