

The Handmaiden's Lowly Estate

Who was Mary and what can she tell us today?

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She's just an ordinary girl, no different from the many who came before her or the many who will come after. Her days are spent in hard labor, lightening her mother's back-breaking load. Her hands are chapped from grinding grain, her neck sore from balancing the water jug on top of her head, and her two gowns, carefully mended cast-offs from an older relative, are faded and stained from sweat and dust. Her life is no different from the lives of the other village girls.

She loves her family and would eagerly do anything to make their lives better—well, almost anything. She catches sight of the man her father has promised her to in marriage. He is working outside his carpentry shop, sanding the rough edges off a manger. For a moment she admires the care he takes over the simple trough for feeding animals, but then she remembers: as far as their families are concerned, she is no more valuable than the livestock.

She grabs the water jug and begins the two-mile trek to the well. It is the only time she has to be alone. She does not want to leave her mother yet—she is only fourteen—but the livestock her father will receive in exchange for her will feed her family. Maybe her brothers will get an educa-

tion. Besides, everyone says what a good man her fiancé is. She should be grateful.

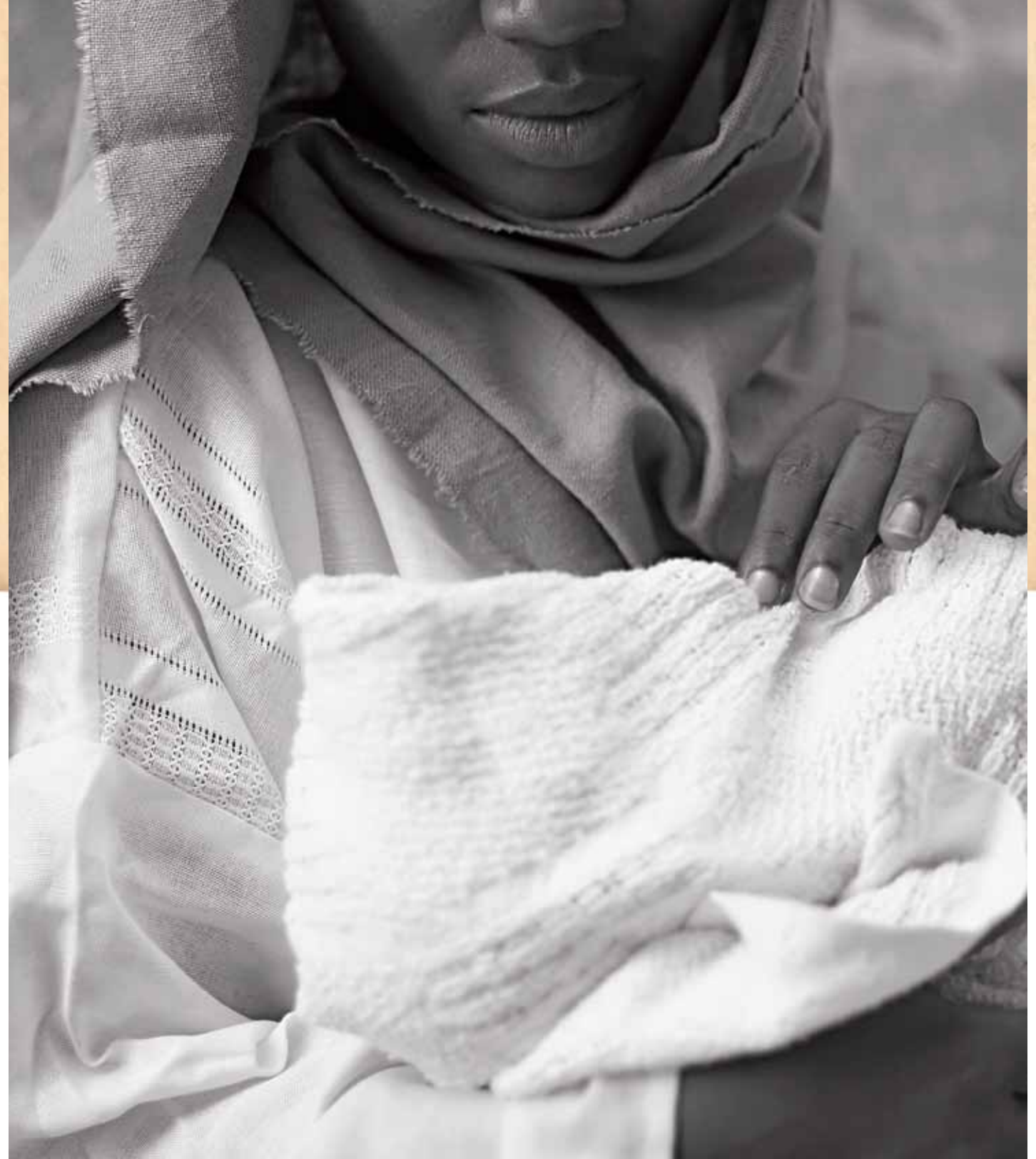
Still. She has been traded. By the time she reaches the well, she is dripping with a salty mixture of sweat and tears. Her feelings of fear, dread, grief, and rejection are tying her empty stomach in knots. She has seen too many bruises on the other girls in the village after they are married. Others have died trying to birth babies their young bodies couldn't accommodate. She gulps down water from the well, but she still thirsts for something—she's not sure what. Is this really all there is to life—unceasing work, hunger, and despair in this poverty-stricken village?

This girl wasn't born two thousand years ago. She was born fourteen years ago. Unlike Mary, her name has never been written down anywhere. She has never been greeted by an angel. And there is a good chance she will die without ever hearing the name of Jesus. She may never hear that his mother was a teenage girl just like her, or that he came to save the world, to bring hope, to offer a new life to people like her.

She is a member of one of the largest, most vulnerable, and most overlooked groups in the world—adolescent girls living in poverty. More

than 600 million adolescent girls are growing up in developing nations today. Twenty-five percent of them receive no education. One in seven will be married by age fifteen. According to the United Nations Population Fund, somewhere between one-quarter and one-half of them will become mothers before they become adults. The statistics are fuzzy because record keeping is spotty. What is certain is that at least 14 million girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen give birth in developing nations each year, and that complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for adolescent girls worldwide, surpassing violence, malnutrition, and disease—even AIDS.

Yet only two cents of every relief dollar is used to help young girls. The lack of strategic focus on teenage girls belies the fact that they are key figures in the war against poverty, preventable disease, human trafficking, and infant and child mortality. Every twelve-year-old girl represents a tipping point for the future of society: will she attend school and get an education that will help her break the cycle of extreme poverty? Will she be married young and start bearing children she is not equipped to care for, putting them (and herself) at risk for malnutrition, preventable disease,



and death? Will she become one of the millions of girls who are trafficked each year, sold or tricked into slavery in a desperate bid for their family's survival?

Statistics from Sub-Saharan Africa show this phenomenon in action. According to UNICEF, African women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four are *three times* as likely to be infected with HIV as their

male peers. This is due to a cultural practice of marrying young girls to older men who can provide a greater measure of financial security but have usually had multiple sexual partners. The children born of these unions often carry on the devastating legacy of disease, and are almost always orphaned, increasing the economic burden on cash-strapped African nations and charities, and contribut-

ing to the widespread sense of despair.

When African girls are able to postpone marriage and get an education, however, the numbers change. Girls who finish elementary school are only half as likely to contract HIV, and fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds enrolled in school are five times less

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likely to become infected than their out-of-school peers. Unfortunately, only 17 percent of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa go to secondary school, but making the commitment to increase those numbers could significantly stem the tide of the African AIDS epidemic.

Study after study has shown that the most effective way to alleviate poverty, malnutrition, and preventable disease while promoting sustainable development is to equip women with education, civil influence, and economic clout—preferably *before* they marry and begin having children. The well-being of women and girls translates directly into the well-being of their children and, ultimately, society.

Such studies are not news. Women have always played an important role in God’s redemptive plan for the

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world. Many Bible scholars cite God’s original promise to Eve in Genesis 3—that her seed would crush the serpent’s head—as the beginning of the covenant theme that ties all of Scripture together. God—Elohim—will be our God. We will be his people. He will dwell among us, forgive our sins, and make us a blessing to all nations. And he will do it through the seed of woman, the promised Messiah.

Even in a culture that didn’t place a high value on women, God was continually up-ending patriarchal social norms. God promised Abraham more offspring than he could count, but not just any offspring would do. Galatians

4 specifies that it was Sarah’s child through whom God’s plan would be played out, the child of the promise. The patriarch Isaac favored his burly, masculine firstborn, Esau, but God

let Rebecca in on his plans from the get-go, telling her directly that Jacob, her quiet homebody, was the one who would receive his blessing. It was the overlooked, unloved Leah whom God included in the lineage of the Messiah, not Jacob’s beautiful, favored second wife, Rachel. And of course it was the woman’s offspring, Mary’s son, who claimed the ultimate victory over death, just as God had promised Eve. God refused to exclude women from a full, significant role in his redemptive purposes, even when society had other ideas.

Highlighting the important role women play (and have played) in

What You Can Do

The Covenant is actively helping girls around the world. Here are some ways you can help:

Scholarships

Working to empower children in underprivileged communities throughout the world, Covenant Kids is a scholarship program coordinated by Covenant World Mission. National church partners in Colombia, India, DR Congo, and Sudan work with children trapped in poverty. Scholarships support formal and non-formal education as well as clothing, meals, medical checkups, and family counseling to offer girls practical skills and hope for the future. Scholarships can be purchased for \$25 a month. For more information, go to www.covchurch.org/covkids, or contact Kim Crawford at kim.crawford@covchurch.org or (773) 907-3309.

Community Development

Covenant World Relief supports several development projects that directly benefit young girls, as well as women, including:

- Empowering women living in tribal villages in India to develop locally feasible income-generating projects (India Covenant Social Services in Chopda, Dang, and Orissa)
- Providing quality full-day preschool education for children ages one to five, in partnership with the Covenant Church of Colombia (Colombia Hope for Life Education)
- Educating and assisting children in Sudan who have been orphaned by the ongoing conflict as well as by the AIDS epidemic (Sudan Vulnerable Children)

For more information on any of these projects, go to www.covchurch.org/cwr, or contact David Husby at david.husby@covchurch.org or Chrissy Palmerlee at chrissy.palmerlee@covchurch.org, or call (773) 907-3301.

Support for Orphans and Medical Care

Young girls in DR Congo who have lost their families are cared for in an orphanage in the town of Gemena that is partially supported by the Paul Carlson Partnership. There the girls find a loving home and are also able to go to school. Also, Congolese girls who are sick or gravely malnourished are nursed back to health in one of the hospitals run by the Congo Covenant Church. The Paul Carlson Partnership provides significant assistance to make their care possible. For more information, visit the Paul Carlson Partnership at www.paulcarlson.org, or contact them at (773) 907-3370 or pcpinfo@paulcarlson.org.

Human Trafficking

Girls in North America who escape from human traffickers can find a safe living environment at New Day for Children. This year all funds donated to the Break the Chains project through the Department of Women Ministries will support New Day for Children. For more information, contact the Department of Women Ministries at (773) 907-3332, or email wmc@covchurch.org.

God's desires for society shines a spotlight on the potential of the other half of the world's population, for both good and evil, development and destruction. History favors the powerful and influential, and all too often so do we, focusing our attention and efforts on the people we believe can make the most difference. But God consistently aligns himself with the vulnerable, the downtrodden, and the oppressed. He delights in using the things the world considers foolish to shame the wise. Perhaps there is no better example of this than the miracle that occurred at Nazareth: the Holy Spirit coming upon an adolescent girl from an oppressed people group, God himself coming to dwell in her and with her, in an incredible analogy of what was to come for all who put their faith in Christ.

This Christmas let us align ourselves with God's work of defending and redeeming his daughters. Sponsor a scholarship for a young girl through Covenant Kids. Look into the micro-finance programs that empower girls with economic opportunity, allowing them to fund their own education and delay marriage until they are older, through Covenant World Relief. Or encourage an adolescent girl at your church, telling her how valuable you think she is, how valuable God thinks she is. You never know what an insecure, unassuming teenage girl might do, given a little support and encouragement. God just might use her to change the world.

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For he hath regarded the lowly estate of his handmaiden....He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:46-53, KJV). ■

For more information on how helping girls helps society and links to the studies and statistics used in this article, go to www.girleffect.org.