

MARY

MOTHER OF JESUS

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Solve the Secret Code!

At the end of each chapter, you'll find a set of numbers—it's the code to a secret message throughout the book.

Each group of four numbers stands for a single letter in the message. Your job is to pinpoint each mystery letter with the codes, then write the letters above each four-digit number group. When you've finished solving each chapter's code, read the letters from chapter one through the end of the book to find out exactly what the secret message says!

Here's how to use the codes:

- The first number is the page number—within that chapter.
- The second number is the paragraph on the page—count full paragraphs only.
- The third number is the word in the appropriate paragraph.
- The fourth number is the letter in the appropriate word—this is the letter you'll write above the number group.

Enjoy the story. . .and solving the secret message!

1

In God's House

Fifteen-year-old Mary ran up the path that led out of Nazareth, a water bucket swinging from her arm. She skimmed past the small, dusty houses, her stomach full of excited butterflies. The sun was already sinking low in the sky, and she was in a hurry to reach the well where she would draw the water for the evening meal. Joseph would be eating with her family tonight.

She had promised to marry him in a year's time, but she was still a little shy around him. Their time together was short, and they seldom had a chance to speak alone. Each time she saw him, though, she loved



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him more. She hoped he felt the same about her.

Tonight she wanted to get back from the well in time to wash her face and arms, for she had been helping Ema, her mother, grind wheat all day, and she knew the fine, pale dust still clung to her skin. She did not want Joseph to see her looking grimy and sweat-streaked.

As she climbed the hill out of town, however, her feet slowed. This was her favorite time to come to the well, when most of the other women would be busy in their own homes preparing the evening meals, and Mary could walk alone, looking at the sky and the fields and the blue hills that lay along the horizon like smoke. She seldom had a chance to be by herself, but here on the empty path, with only the sound of the quiet wind murmuring through the grass, she had a chance to think and examine her heart. Here, she could open herself to God.

Long ago, when Mary was only a small child, her mother had said to her, “You have to choose, Mary. Do you want your own way? Or do you want God’s way?”

Mary smiled, remembering. She had been so angry that day, and she hadn’t wanted Ema to start talking about God. But her mother had bent over the bread she was kneading, pressing her fingers deep into the soft dough, and then she had said, “When we accept everything that happens to us—even the things that anger us or make us sad—as gifts from God’s hands, then He can use everything that happens to us for His purposes. Everything—the little things and the big things, the good things and the things that seem too hard for us to bear.”

Ema’s strong hands paused, and she looked up over

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the flat rooftop of their home. She sighed, her face troubled. "Some things are hard, even when you're grown. Look at your cousin Elisabeth who visited us last week. All her life she has prayed for a child of her own. And all this time, again and again, God tells her no. And yet Elisabeth never stops saying yes to God's will, even when she longs for something different. Even when the other women point at her and whisper because she has no children."

Ema's face cleared, and she smiled as she shaped the dough into a round ball. "Our God knows what is best for us. You will be surprised, Mary, how simply saying yes to God can change everything."

Mary had not understood exactly what Ema had been saying that day. Her cousin Elisabeth was much older than she was, older even than Ema, and Elisabeth's problems had not seemed as important as Mary's own. But that night when her father taught his children from the Torah and the Psalms, Mary had heard the words in a new way.

Now, as Mary reached the well, she gave a sigh of contentment, glad that no one else was there, no women gossiping about their neighbors, none of her friends giggling over the young men. For once the stone well stood empty on the high plain. Mary leaned against the windswept cedar tree, remembering again the words her father had said on that long-ago night.

"The God of Israel and the God of David is your God, too, children," Abba had told them, his deep voice gentle and full of joy. "We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Because He is your shepherd, you will always have everything that you need. You will live in the house of the Lord forever."

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His words had been like a door opening wide in her heart. God was as real as Abba and Ema. . . and He loved her! The knowledge made goose bumps prick her skin.

After that, she liked to pretend that everywhere she went was God's house, each place a different room in an endless mansion. And she practiced saying yes to God every day, over and over again. Sometimes she found she could say yes to big things easier than she could to little things—but she discovered that each yes she said opened her heart that much wider to God and His love. If she said yes often enough, she reasoned, one day she would have a space inside her that would be big enough to be another room in God's great mansion. . . .

Mary glanced at the sun sinking lower in the west. She pushed the memories out of her head and leaned over the well. The cool, dark hole smelled like rain and stones, and Mary had always loved to peer down into its depth, looking for the blue glimmer of the sky's reflection far, far below. Today as she dropped the bucket down, she noticed her own dusty arm, and she remembered that Joseph would be at her house soon. If she didn't hurry, he would find her covered with wheat dust. She tugged the heavy load of water upward.

Murmuring a prayer of gratitude to God for the gift of clear, sweet water, she paused a moment. Despite her need to hurry, she checked to see if there were any doors in her heart she had closed in God's face, any places where she was saying no to God instead of yes. Her life was full of good gifts lately, things to which she could easily say yes—like Joseph. She smiled to herself and picked up the bucket, ready to hurry home, when a flash of light from the well stopped her. For a moment, the water in the well seemed to gleam like gold.

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She bent over to peer down the dark hole, but she saw only the faint, faraway, silvery blue reflection of the evening sky. She shrugged, but as she was about to turn away, she stopped still, staring at her own arm. Each tiny mote of wheat dust that clung to the fine hairs on her skin glinted gold, making her arm shine as though it were reflecting fire.



Slowly, her heart pounding, she turned toward the source of the light. She sucked in a long, shaky breath and sank down with a thump on the edge of the well.

In front of her stood a tall, shining man dressed in white.

Secret Code:

5-2-3-3 1-1-1-7 3-3-4-7

2-1-7-4 4-4-5-3 5-3-4-3 3-2-5-7

2

The Visitor

Light poured out of him, from his skin and clothes and face; even his hair shone, she noticed. He was in the shape of a man, but she knew he was like no man she had ever seen, and his face held something for which she could find no words. . . joy and love and strength, and something more.

Her eyes traveled from his face downward, and then her heart began to pound even harder as she stared down at his feet. They were bare, as full of light as the rest of him—and they were planted firmly in the air, a good hand's breadth above the ground. Mary slid down off the stones onto her



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knees, her head bowed before this frightening creature.

“Greetings, favored woman!” the man said. “The Lord is with you!”

Mary kept her eyes fixed on the dusty ground beneath her knees. *What do you mean?* she wanted to ask. The man’s words held such certainty, such joy, that she was confused. Surely he must have her confused with someone else, she thought, but when she peeked up at his face, she knew how unlikely this strange and mighty man would be to make a mistake.

“Don’t be frightened, Mary,” the man said.

She looked up at him. “How do you know my name?” she whispered.

The man only smiled. “God has decided to bless you!” he announced. “You will become pregnant and have a Son, and you are to name Him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David. And He will reign over Israel forever; His Kingdom will never end!”

Mary swayed, her body trembling with terror. She put her hands flat on the ground to keep from falling on her face and stared up at the glowing man. Desperately, she tried to pay attention to the man’s words—David’s throne, a prince that would be born, a kingdom that would never end.

She knew that no one had sat in David’s throne for hundreds of years now, and Israel had been ruled by Rome since before she was born. . .but none of that had ever been very important to her, and she could make no sense of the man’s message. She grabbed at the one thing she did understand, though, and said, “How can I become pregnant? I’m not even married yet.”

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The man—the creature—looked down at her for a moment, his eyes filled with a stern kindness, and then he stepped around her and sat on the edge of the well. She looked at him suspiciously, but he seemed to be resting normally on the stones, not hovering in the air as he had before. He smiled. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Baby born to you will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God.”

“Oh.” Mary still crouched on her knees on the ground, but the creature was much closer to her now, and she could not bear his radiance. She shut her eyes tight. How could he come from the same God whom she had loved and worshipped all her life? This was too strange, beyond anything she had ever thought about or imagined. His words frightened her.

The creature leaned back on his hands. “You know what else?” he asked, as casually as though he were one of her friends exchanging a bit of gossip. The crazy thought made her want to giggle, and she bit her lip and ducked her head, but not before she saw the creature smile, as though he had read her thoughts. “Your cousin Elisabeth is pregnant, too,” he continued. “And she an old woman!”

His tone was so exactly like one used by the women who would gather at the well to discuss each other’s business that a little piece of her giggle slipped out. The creature only nodded, his bright eyes shining. “People used to say Elisabeth would never have any children—but she’s already in her sixth month.”

Mary struggled to make sense of his words. Elisabeth was having a baby. But Elisabeth was old, too old to have any children now. Ema said she had given up

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all hope, and now that Mary was older and understood how important babies were, she felt sorry for Elisabeth, poor wrinkled woman whose life was almost over. . . .

The creature's words made no sense. If he was a messenger from God, wouldn't God have picked a more important message to send? After all, the priests always made the Lord God seem as though He were fairly busy with men's business—and here was this strange man—this creature—this *angel* talking about babies and pregnancies: women's business. "How can this be?" she whispered.

The angel held Mary's eyes. He reached down and picked up a small stone and held it on his flat palm. Mary



looked down at the stone, wondering why he had chosen an ordinary brown pebble to hold in his shining hand—and then the stone dropped straight through the angel's hand as though his flesh weren't there at all. The pebble hit the ground and bounced, and the angel laughed, a noise so full of joy that she caught her breath.

"With God nothing is impossible."

Mary's eyes were fixed on the small, brown stone that had fallen through the creature's palm. *A magician's trick*, part of her whispered stubbornly, but when she looked back up into the angel's face, she knew that this was no magician with a bunch of sleight-of-hand tricks.

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No, this man, this angel, lived in the house of the Lord, just as she herself did.

A rush of understanding swept through her, and she realized that God must have many rooms in His house, rooms she had never even imagined. This bright creature had come to her from one of those other rooms she had never glimpsed.

“Will you accept this gift God has given you?” the angel asked gently.

“Now?” she whispered. “Today?”

The angel nodded.

For an instant, Mary considered what it would mean for her to become pregnant now. She pictured her parents' faces, Joseph's. . . . She gasped, feeling suddenly afraid again, but she met the angel's gaze, her own eyes steady.

Love poured through her. She bowed her head, and then she spoke the word that had become so familiar to her. “Yes.” She lifted her head. “May it be done to me as you have said.”

Mary didn't know how long she knelt there on the damp earth beside the well. The angel had left her, she knew, but she continued to be wrapped in an awareness of God's love, a sense of His presence stronger than any she had ever experienced. She might have spent only a moment or two there with God's Spirit; she might have spent an entire lifetime.

When she came to herself, the sun was only a red line along the western horizon. Her family would be worried about her, she knew, and she picked up the bucket of water. As she hurried down the path, the water

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sloshing over her hand, she realized she must have been with God, outside of time, in eternity. But how was she going to explain that to Ema and Abba? How could she explain to Joseph?

Secret Code:

1-2-2-4 3-4-5-3 5-2-8-2 4-1-3-4

2-3-2-1 4-2-3-2 5-1-2-4 1-1-2-2 2-5-3-3 3-5-2-9

3

Elisabeth

Three weeks later, early in the morning, Mary again climbed the path that led out of Nazareth, but this time she had no bucket in her hand, and she did not stop by the well. She kept on walking, deeper and deeper into the hills.

The morning sun was bright on the fields of blue flax blossoms that grew along the path, but Mary's heart was full of shadows. Her mother and father believed her now when she said she was going to have a baby, but Ema's face was lined with worry, and Abba did his work slowly, as though his arms and legs were suddenly too heavy for him to lift.

At night when the family lay on their sleeping mats, she had heard Ema and Abba whispering, talking about her until deep into the night. She caught snatches of their words: "She is a good girl, you know she. . ." "Some man. . . a stranger. . . against her will. . ."

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“Could it be she spoke the truth and. . . ?” “This nonsense about Elisabeth having a baby, too. . .” “Mary does not lie. . . She believes this story she told us. . .” “What will Joseph. . . ?” “What shall we do?”

Each night, Mary would hear Ema’s tears finally quiet, and she would hear the murmur of their prayers, and then at last their voices would be silent. But Mary would lie awake until the light of dawn came creeping through the window, her hands clasped tightly over her stomach.

During the day, she had gone about her duties quietly, tending the chickens, helping her mother make bread, caring for her younger brothers and sisters, her heart torn between joy and sorrow. She had not spoken



with Joseph since that night when she had seen the angel, the night when she had told him. If they passed each other in the street, he turned away, his face heavy with hurt and anger. She was certain he would come to her father soon and break their betrothal, leaving her to raise God’s Son alone.

Each time she reached this point in her thoughts, her heart would grow tight with fear. An unmarried woman could not give birth to a child. It was against the law. . . But no man would want her now. Why would God ask this of her?

Climbing deeper into the hills, she said softly under her breath, “Yes, God.” She drew in a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “Yes,” she repeated, louder

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this time, though her voice wobbled a little. God would provide for both her and her Son. She would trust herself to God's care. "Yes," she said again, and now her voice was firm and sure.

Yesterday, a rumor had reached Nazareth from the hills where Elisabeth lived with her husband Zechariah: Elisabeth was expecting a child. When Ema heard the news, she had cried out, her voice full of joy and relief, and a little fear. Her eyes had flown to Mary. "You were right," she said slowly.

Mary nodded. "The angel told me."

"It's only a rumor," her father protested gruffly.

Last night when she lay listening to her parents' voices, she had known suddenly what she must do. The oil lamp's dim glow spilled out from the niche in the wall; Mary prayed silently in her heart while she watched the long, dark shadows flicker across the room. When her mother stepped over Mary's sleeping mat to blow out the flame, Mary caught hold of her robe.

"Ema, let me go visit Elisabeth."

Her mother crouched on the floor beside Mary. "Your father is busy with the planting now. Perhaps later, Mary."

"I want to go alone, Ema."

Her mother's hand touched her in the darkness. "It is too far for you, Mary. Especially now. . ." Her voice was troubled.

Mary sat up. "I am strong and well, Ema. And I feel



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the Spirit of God telling me to visit Elisabeth.”

Her mother was silent for a long moment. “Very well,” she said at last. “I will speak with your father.”

Mary had slept peacefully last night for the first time in weeks. Her parents woke her early. They ate together quietly outside in the courtyard, their voices soft so they would not wake the other children, and then they had handed her a bag packed with food and clothing. Her father reminded her of the landmarks she must follow to reach Elisabeth and Zechariah’s home. Her mother had cried. As Mary told them good-bye, their faces were full of love and worry.

Mary pushed away the memory of the lines that had creased Abba’s forehead and puckered Ema’s mouth. She could not take away her parents’ pain. And she could not foresee the future, either. She could only say yes to God one step at a time, trusting that He would take care of everything. But sometimes saying yes was so hard to do.

When her fears had pressed in on her during the past weeks, she had hoped she might see the angel again. She would have liked the comfort of his bright face, the reassurance of his joyful voice—but he had not appeared to her again, though she lingered often at the well. Sometimes she almost wondered if she could have imagined everything that had happened. She shifted the bag over her shoulder and walked a little faster. If only Elisabeth would believe her story.

Two days later, she at last reached Zechariah and

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Elisabeth's small home tucked between the hills. Mary pushed her hair behind her ears and straightened her head covering. She smoothed her travel-stained robe as best she could, then took a deep breath and stuck her head inside the doorway.

"It's your cousin Mary," she called. "I've come to—"

Before she could finish, Elisabeth hurried toward her with a glad cry.

"You are favored by God above all women," she exclaimed, taking Mary's hands in hers. "Your Child will be destined for God's mightiest praise."

Mary stood silent, stunned by the joy she saw in her cousin's face. After her parents' disbelief and Joseph's rejection, Elisabeth's welcome was startling, amazing. . . and comforting. Here at last was someone who believed her, someone who would rejoice with her over the angel's incredible announcement.



Elisabeth tugged her gently inside the house. "Come in. Sit down and rest. You came all that way by yourself—and in your condition, too! How are you feeling? I was very, very sick the first three months—and always hungry. Let me get you something to eat."

She turned and began bustling around, bringing out a loaf of bread and a bowl of stew, a cup of water and a portion of cheese. She glanced over her shoulder at Mary and chuckled. "You looked so shocked for a moment there when I flew at you before you could

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barely get a word out. Zechariah's always telling me to calm down. But this. . ." She patted her large, round belly, then waved her hand at Mary. "It's all so exciting. So amazing. I can't calm down."

She set the food in front of Mary, then sat down beside her. Her voice was soft now as she said, "I am honored that the mother of my Lord should visit me."

Mary looked at her cousin. Her hair was as white as ever, and her face was still lined, but her cheeks were as flushed as a child's, and her eyes shone. "How did you know?" Mary asked her, though anything seemed possible to her now.

Elisabeth smiled and patted her stomach again. "When you came in and greeted me, the instant I heard your voice, my baby moved in me for joy!" She leaned over and touched Mary's hand. "Go on now, child. You need to eat. The miracle inside you is flesh and blood, remember. You'd better feed the both of you!"

While Mary ate, Elisabeth told her own story, about the angel who had come to Zechariah. Zechariah had lost his voice because he hadn't believed the angel's news, and now he could only communicate through writing. Fascinated, Mary listened silently, but then Elisabeth wanted to know Mary's story, too. Mary took a last bite of stew, and then, shyly at first, she told Elisabeth everything that had happened. The more she told, the faster the words tumbled out of her mouth. She was so relieved to have someone who finally understood!

When she had finished, Elisabeth sat back and smiled. For a long moment, she was silent, her lips moving, and Mary knew she was praying. Then Elisabeth's smile grew wider, and she said, "You have always given your whole heart to God. You have believed that

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He would do what He said. That is why He has given you this wonderful blessing.”

Suddenly, Mary felt as though joy was blossoming inside her, spreading wider and wider until she could no longer contain it. She burst out, “Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior! For He took notice of His lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me blessed. For He, the Mighty One, is holy, and He has done great things for me. His mercy goes on from generation to generation, to all who fear Him. His mighty arm does tremendous things!

“How He scatters the proud and haughty ones! He has taken princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.

“And how He has helped His servant Israel! He has not forgotten His promise to be merciful. For He promised our ancestors—Abraham and his children—to be merciful to them forever.”

Mary understood now why she had felt God’s Spirit telling her to visit Elisabeth. Surrounded by Elisabeth’s delighted love and understanding, Mary could begin to prepare for the Savior’s birth. She leaned back in her chair, her hands pressed against her belly, and her heart spilled over with awe and joy.

Her weeks with Elisabeth passed quickly. The age difference between them no longer seemed to matter, and the two women spent long hours talking about pregnancy and God, babies and miracles. Some evenings as they sat around the supper table, they laughed until they cried, while Zechariah listened and chuckled silently.

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Other evenings, they sat up on the rooftop, gazing up at the stars that sprinkled the deep blue sky, praying softly together. Mary watched Elisabeth's round stomach swell larger and larger, and all the while she delighted in the growing changes in her own body.

At last, after three months, Elisabeth decided that it was time Mary returned to Nazareth, before traveling became any more difficult for her. Mary was disappointed not to stay for the birth of Elisabeth's baby. He was due any day now, but she knew Elisabeth was right. Besides, it was time she once again faced her parents. . . and Joseph.

As they said good-bye, Elisabeth and Mary clung to each other and cried. "I will be praying for you," Elisabeth whispered. "Don't be afraid. God will work everything out."



Zechariah pressed Mary's hand silently. And then she squared her shoulders and turned toward the path that would lead her over the hills to Nazareth. By now, she thought as she walked, Joseph would surely have asked her father to release him from their betrothal. But God would be with her. . .no matter what.

The journey home passed quickly. She sang psalms as she walked, and at night she felt God's presence all around her as she slept. He was her companion

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wherever she went. Over and over, she hummed the words of her favorite psalm:

*O lord, thou hast searched me, and known me.
Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising,
thou understandest my thought afar off.
Thou compasses my path and my lying down,
and art acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word in my tongue,
but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether.
Thou hast beset me behind and before,
and laid thine hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high, I cannot attain unto it.
Whither shall I go from thy spirit?
or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:
if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me.
If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me;
even the night shall be light about me.
Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee;
but the night shineth as the day:
the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.
For thou hast possessed my reins:
thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.
I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully
made: marvellous are thy works;
and that my soul knoweth right well.
My substance was not hid from thee,*