

QUEST 52

A FIFTEEN-MINUTE-A-DAY
YEARLONG PURSUIT OF JESUS



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MARK E. MOORE

Bestselling author of *CORE 52*

QUEST

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PURSUIT OF JESUS

MARK E. MOORE



WATERBROOK

QUEST 52

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Moore, Mark E. (Mark Edward), author.

Title: Quest 52 : a fifteen-minute-a-day yearlong pursuit of Jesus / Mark E. Moore, Ph.D.

Other titles: Quest fifty two

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, [2021] | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021005319 | ISBN 9780593193723 (acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593193730 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Jesus Christ—Person and offices—Biblical teaching—Textbooks. Jesus Christ—Example—Biblical teaching—Textbooks.

Classification: LCC BT207 .M66 2021 | DDC 232—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021005319>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Interior book design by Virginia Norey

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To my grandchildren, who will journey beyond me on the quest
for Christ but who make my own journey toward sunset more
delightful than the sunrise:

Jackson Howerton

Nya Moore

Dominic Moore

Duke Howerton

Rosalie Moore

Lennon Howerton

Bear Moore

Dean Howerton

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Introduction

Chasing after Jesus is the journey of a lifetime. In Jesus's own words, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45–46). Jesus is that pearl of great price. He is worth every effort to obtain him and every sacrifice required along the way. ***This is the quest—to chase after him, the pearl of great price.***

This is *my* quest. Even after teaching the life of Christ for twenty years at the college level, I am surprised with breathtaking regularity when I get a glimpse of him I haven't seen before. I am still mystified by his majesty. The deeper I dig, the higher I realize he is. He is always beyond my grasp, even when he walks beside me. The more I see of him, the less I think I really know him.

I am reminded of an incident in the middle of Jesus's ministry. His closest disciples had been with him for more than a year. Now they were alone with him in a boat (Mark 4:35–41). A storm threatened to swallow them while Jesus was sound asleep in the stern. The men woke him. They needed all hands on deck, probably to help bail out the boat. They had no clue what Jesus could actually do. He stood up in the boat and rebuked the wind and waves, which obeyed. Instantly.

Just as quickly, the disciples' terror shifted from outside the boat to inside. They had been afraid of drowning in a storm; now they were afraid of standing in his presence. They huddled in the bow of the boat and asked, "Who is this man?" That is the question. ***This is the quest—to discover the authentic Jesus.*** Not the cartoon-figure Jesus or a

haloed icon in stained glass. The real Jesus—the Jesus who wants to be known.

The Importance of the Quest

Perhaps you're not a religious person; many on the quest are not. That's okay. Jesus is worth the pursuit regardless of our past. After all, no other individual has had as great an impact on our world as Jesus of Nazareth. He challenged us to love our enemies, thus reordering the rules for social engagement. He prioritized the outcast, renovating social justice. He introduced servant leadership, transforming politics. He demanded that we examine our hearts and not just our behavior, revolutionizing ethics. He introduced God to the world as *Father*, thus changing the very nature of prayer. There is no quarter of our modern lives that has not been affected by Jesus of Nazareth—not education, science, religion, society, law, ethics, art, or entertainment. Therefore, he is worth pursuing. He is worth devoting a year to discovering what those first disciples discovered in the boat: he is beyond our expectations and beside us all the way.

Do you want to know him, the real Jesus? Do you want to absorb his influence so you can influence others? If so, *welcome to the quest*.

This is not a journey across the flatlands. It can, at times, be a torturous trek. But the greatest challenge we face on this quest is not the terrain out there. Rather, it is our own presuppositions, thinking that we have already reached our destination. We *think* we know who Jesus is. That is the greatest impediment to our quest.

The Challenge of the Quest

In the beginning, God made humans in his own image (Genesis 1:27). We have been returning the favor ever since, trying to make God look like us. It was obvious when ancient priests fashioned idols to reflect their highest ideals of war, sex, riches, and beauty. Their images revealed what they really worshipped. We may imagine ourselves to be more sophisti-

cated, but we have done virtually the same thing when we portray Jesus as supporting our cultural values, ethical sensibilities, and economic aspirations.

It is most obvious with our artistic renderings of Jesus. International images of Christ look like their creators' countrymen. He has darker skin in Africa, lighter hair in Europe, and distinct eyes in Asia. In one sense, that's fine. After all, Jesus came to earth in a recognizable physical form so we could relate to him. We all need to see Jesus in a way we can access. The problem comes when we assume that if he *looks* like we do, he must also *think* and *act* like we do.

Our portrayals of Jesus don't end with paintings; they extend to our preaching. We speak into existence a Jesus that reflects our own image. Virtually every nationality and ethnicity have co-opted Jesus for their own political and social agendas. We assume that he agrees with our cultures and lifestyles. This quest is too long to carry our presuppositions with us, so let's shed them now. Can we admit our biases and begin the quest with humility, honesty, and submission, determined to follow the path wherever it leads and whatever it costs?

The goal of this book is to help you do just that. Think of it as a field guide to your quest for Christ. All it can do is point you in the right direction. The quest is your own. No one can take this journey for you, although some may take it with you.

The Strategy of the Quest

The first four books of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—describe the events of Jesus's incomparable life. *Quest 52* will highlight fifty-two incidents from Jesus's life. These will include people Jesus met, miracles he performed, things he taught, and qualities he modeled. After you read about these incidents in the Bible, *Quest 52* will guide you through some thoughts and exercises to help you see Jesus authentically. Think of these fifty-two incidents as mile markers along the way.

Between each mile marker are five days of exercises. It is here that Jesus will meet you face to face.

- **Day 1:** Read the passage(s) from the Bible. You must not short-circuit this step. Begin in the Bible; then move to the essay. Each essay focuses on one biblical concept from one gospel passage and answers one key question relevant to your life.
- **Day 2:** Look back to the wisdom of the Old Testament to gain perspective on this mile marker.
- **Day 3:** Look forward to the letters in the New Testament, where fellow pilgrims expressed their own take on this mile marker.
- **Day 4:** Discuss with fellow pilgrims what you are learning on this leg of the journey.
- **Day 5:** Take your next step in following the path of Jesus.

The book you hold in your hand is the primary resource for this quest for Christ. However, as a bonus, we have provided other tools to add value to this book, especially if you are going through the material with a group:

A video from the author introducing each essay to help make the material in the book more personal. This is a great way to kick off the group for visual learners.

A topical study for overachievers who want to dig deeper into some historical or theological topics. This may help individuals oriented toward biblical research.

An audio lecture from one of my college classes on the life of Christ. This will benefit auditory learners.

These optional resources are housed at www.Quest52.com.

This quest will likely demand more than we expect, but the pearl of great price is more valuable than we could ever imagine. So let's pursue Jesus relentlessly; he wants to be found. He may even join us along the journey. Let's begin.

Section I

The Person of Jesus

We begin our journey by looking to the person of Jesus. We are trying to discover where he came from and what drove him to his destiny of death. The first series of essays is all about the **beginning** of Jesus's life—his birth and the striking events surrounding his arrival. The section on his **purpose** looks at his primary motivations from the time he was twelve through his three-year ministry. The third series of essays looks at his **relationships** with particular attention to how he treated people: disciples, family, opponents, and sinners.

Beginning: chapters 1–4

Purpose: chapters 5–8

Relationships: chapters 9–13

1

Is God Jesus?

Biblical Concept: Incarnation

Read: John 1:1–18

Who is God? It's a foundational question. I thought I had an answer when I was baptized on my ninth birthday. Three years later, that answer morphed with my parents' divorce. It altered again when I got married and changed even more when my son was born. One wonders whether the question can ever be answered. Are we just making God in our own image? Is God a projection of our own needs and experiences? Is he good? Is he all powerful? Is he one or many? Is he "he" or "she"? Everyone—whether a theologian, convict, atheist, or philosopher—seems to have an opinion. Who actually has the authority or experience to give an answer?

According to John 1, there is one—Jesus—who can definitively answer the question. Whether or not you believe the Bible to be authoritative, I suspect we can agree that if someone met God *face to face* in heaven and then came to earth to tell us about him, that person's description would trump our personal opinions. This is precisely what John claimed: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (verse 18). If Jesus is whom he claimed to be (God), if he did what the Bible says he did, then he is the perfect place to begin

our quest to know our Creator. I believe Jesus is God. Nevertheless, beyond bias or opinion, anyone would have to admit that Jesus of Nazareth has had more impact on humanity than any other person in history. So people searching for God would do well to start their quest with the person of Jesus. He may be the answer to this foundational question: Who is God?

Jesus Is Creator

Let's begin at the beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (verse 1). If this sounds familiar, it should. It echoes Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." John connected Jesus, the Word, with the God who created the world with a word. What an audacious claim. What if it's true? To be fair, John was not the only Jew to claim Jesus created the world. Paul said it like this: "By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16–17). The New Testament claims that the Creator, God, inhabited human flesh in the person of Jesus.

Is there evidence for this? Well, one could point to the prophecies he fulfilled (Luke 24:44; John 5:39), his divine birth (Luke 1:30–35), his sinless life (Hebrews 4:15), or a plethora of miracles. However, the most remarkable (and historically verifiable) evidence is his resurrection from the dead (see chapter 49). It was this singular event that transformed Paul from persecutor to preacher, replaced Peter's cowardice with courage, and changed James from antagonist to advocate. The Resurrection moved worship from Saturday to Sunday, introduced baptism and the Lord's Supper to a fledgling church, and opened the door to all ethnicities. The Resurrection is not merely an intellectual historical question; it is the genesis of the church as we know it.

Ultimately, you need to make up your own mind about who Jesus is.

However, you would be in good company if you declared him Lord. After all, *Jesus claimed* to have all authority (Matthew 28:18), even to forgive sins (Mark 2:10) and judge the world (John 5:24–30). He said he grants eternal life (John 14:6) and raises the dead (John 11:25) and declared himself to be the Son of God (Mark 14:61–62), one with the Father (John 10:30), and the only one who fully knows God (Matthew 11:27).

Furthermore, his *disciples affirmed* he was God’s Son (Matthew 14:33), even God himself (John 20:28). His followers worshipped him (Matthew 28:9; Luke 7:36–50), and the crowds proclaimed him as savior (Luke 19:35–40). Even his *enemies admitted* he was the Son of God (Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:39–43), and no demon doubted his identity (Luke 4:41). Throughout the New Testament, we have clear declarations of the divinity of Jesus (John 1:18; 12:41; Romans 9:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:12; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20). However, he is a different kind of deity—one who is accessible precisely because he is near.

Jesus Is Here

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This idea that God became flesh is called the Incarnation. Of course, it sparks all kinds of questions: How can God be one and three at the same time? If Jesus is God, did he pray to himself? Is there a hierarchy in the Godhead? Perhaps you have heard such questions. Without being dismissive (because these are interesting questions), can we just admit that the answers are above our pay grade? How could humans describe the essence of the unseen? This is actually more comforting than disconcerting. After all, I don’t want to worship a God I can fit in my own intellectual box. He is above and beyond. However frustrating that may be, it is comforting to know that the God I worship is beyond my capacity to comprehend.

The more important question, by far, is this: How could we ever know the unknowable God if he didn’t make himself known? We can’t take a

shuttle to heaven. We can't use human language to describe what is beyond our limitations. So, if God wanted us to know him, does it not make sense that he would come to us in a form we could recognize? We all know how this works. If you want to play with a child, what do you do? You get on the floor, look at her eye to eye, and use age-appropriate vocabulary. That's what God did in Jesus. Call it the Incarnation if you like. I just call it considerate. He met us where we are.

Now here is where the conversation gets really interesting. If you made a list of all the things you know about God, then eliminated all the things you know about him only because you have seen Jesus, what kind of God would you be left with? My guess is this God would still be powerful but not personal. He would be just but perhaps lacking in mercy. He would be creative and beautiful but not relational.

We believe the best things we believe about God because we have seen them in Jesus. Three of these things are unique to Christianity:

- 1. God is near.** Many religions have deities, such as gods of water, wind, and fire, that are present but not personal. However, when a deity is personal—Yahweh or Allah, for example—that deity is viewed as distanced from humanity. He is in heaven, exalted, untouchable, and, hence, unknowable. Christianity is the only global religion where God is both personal and knowable. We are invited into a relationship with him. To this point, John 1:12 says, “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” This was a brand-new idea in the Bible, that through Jesus we can pray to God as Father, even calling him Abba (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).
- 2. God is love.** Oh sure, some deities may have affection for their own adherents, but they hate the pagan and the infidel. Jesus, however, said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). And he modeled that from the cross, saying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Only through Jesus do we know the full extent of

God's love: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

- 3. God suffers.** Now, there is a crazy idea! How could the divine suffer? Scour the Old Testament, and you will find only scant suggestions of a suffering God (Isaiah 53; Zechariah 12:10). This is actually an offensive idea in many religions. Yet in Jesus we see a God who suffers for those he loves even while they are unlovely. That is a God worth worshipping. It is a God we never could have imagined without the incarnation of Jesus.

Jesus Is Clear

This brings us full circle to John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." Without Jesus, no one would have painted God with these particular brushstrokes. Imagine how much poorer our world would be without the compassion modeled by Jesus. Showing generosity to strangers, loving enemies, and elevating women and children are all concepts tied to the Incarnation.

Even if I didn't believe in the Incarnation, I would still teach it as an indispensable foundation of human decency, social justice, and human rights. This image of God as near, loving, and suffering is not merely a theological idea; it is a practical model of being human. These qualities are what make for the best CEOs, coaches, parents, and pastors. Jesus shows us the most important attributes of God. For this reason, rather than asking, "Is Jesus God?" we ask, "Is God Jesus?"

Key Points

- The entire New Testament claims that Jesus is God.
- The Incarnation is necessary if we are going to know God.
- The Incarnation is not merely a theological truth; it is the best model of being human.

This Week

- Day 1 (Eyes):** After reading the essay, consider this question:
What is the most important thing you know about God because of Jesus?
- Day 2 (Ears):** Where do you see Jesus in Psalm 2 and Psalm 110?
- Day 3 (Heart):** Meditate on Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8. Using these three verses, write a brief prayer, telling God what you believe about Jesus.
- Day 4 (Voice):** Discussion:
 - What would it take to convince you that your brother (or coworker) is God's Son?
 - Other than Jesus, what resources do we have to know who God is?
 - What might you believe about God if you knew nothing of Jesus?
 - What do you believe about God because you have seen Jesus?
- Day 5 (Hands):** Practice one aspect of the Incarnation—presence. Schedule an evening with your family when you will shut off all screens (phones, computers, TVs, etc.).

Further Resources: Quest52.com/1

2

Is Life Random?

Biblical Concept: Genealogy

Read: Matthew 1:1–17 with Luke 3:23–38

Have you ever been bored reading the Bible? You can admit it; you won't get struck by lightning. The genealogies are the worst. Every time I come to the genealogies, I practice speed-reading. Does that make me a bad person? I know I'm not alone. So, why did God begin the New Testament with a genealogy? The good news of the gospel starts with a real downer.

That's what I thought until my friends Ron and Linda Hayward returned from Papua New Guinea. They were Bible translators who had just come back to the States after translating the New Testament into a native dialect. They spent over a decade learning the language and culture. They toiled over every sentence to make sure it communicated the truth of the gospel. They went through all the stories of Jesus—his miracles, sermons, death, and resurrection. The last thing they translated in Matthew was the genealogy. They didn't think the tribal people would be interested in a list of Jewish names. Boy, were they wrong. When Ron and Linda showed them the Matthew's genealogy, the natives were stunned. "You mean to tell us these are real stories?" they asked.

“What do you mean?” replied Ron and Linda.

“Jesus had a family history,” they said. “That means he is a real person!”

The importance of this seemingly boring list of names struck Ron and Linda (and me). The gospel doesn’t begin “Once upon a time.” It is about real people with real problems, just like you and me.

Genealogies were particularly important to Jews. The story of their salvation was summarized in a list of names. It begins in Genesis with the genealogies of Adam, Noah, and Abraham. Through these families, we trace the history of salvation. *When God saves the world, he does it through imperfect people.* Adam and Eve introduced sin. Noah got drunk right out of the ark. Abraham denied being married to his wife. You get the picture. The genealogies may be full of foreign names, but the biographies of those people are familiar. This is incredibly encouraging because we, too, have the potential to play a role in God’s work in our world despite our failings.

Genealogy in Matthew

Matthew did something both subtle and brilliant. He broke down the genealogy of Jesus into three sections, each with fourteen names: “All the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations” (Matthew 1:17). Have you ever stopped to count them? I did (which tells you something about my social life). The first and third sections do, in fact, have fourteen names. But the middle section has only thirteen names. Stop and fact-check me if you’d like, but I recounted this a dozen times because I couldn’t believe my eyes!¹ (Bear with me for just three short paragraphs while I get into the weeds. I promise it is worth it.)

I thought perhaps that’s all Matthew had to work with and he was just rounding up. Nope. If you go back to 1 Chronicles 3, that pesky section has *seventeen names*. What? Why would Matthew leave out four names, then say there were fourteen? It makes no sense . . . unless you are Jewish.

Now, there is no problem with Matthew leaving out names. Jewish genealogies didn't demand an exact list. So it's not a cultural problem; it's a math problem. Matthew said there were fourteen names when he was one short. Did he miscount? Maybe, but remember, he was a tax collector, and they were not prone to being negligent with numbers.

The solution is in how Matthew counted. He did something very Jewish: he gave one person a double portion (counting that person twice). Who? David. David is the last name in the first section *and* the first name in the second section. Thus, David is the symbolic firstborn in Jesus's genealogy. In fact, the entire book of Matthew is a treatise on how Jesus is the new King David. Moreover, Matthew telegraphed this move in the very first verse. Read it again, noticing that it is out of chronological order: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). Since Abraham is older, he should have received pride of place. But Matthew's story is about a king, not a patriarch. David is in the privileged position.

Here it gets even more interesting. The Hebrew language didn't have numbers, so the alphabet was also used for counting. A = 1, B = 2, and so on. In Hebrew, the name *David* is spelled *DVD*. *D* is the fourth letter and *V* is the sixth. You do the math: 4 + 6 + 4. How about that? Matthew opened the story with a numerological puzzle; when you solve it, you discover that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah of Israel. While this is not a common way of reading the Bible in the West, it would be familiar to Jewish rabbis. Once we see with their eyes, our own eyes widen in wonder.

Inclusion of Women

Matthew's use of numbers is quite Jewish. His inclusion of women was *not*! Women were seen as second class in first-century culture. For a woman to be included in a genealogy, she would have had to be extraordinarily noble. The women in this genealogy, however, were anything but. *Tamar* pretended to be a prostitute and seduced her father-in-law in order

to have a child as an heir (Genesis 38:13–30). That’s messed up! *Rahab* was a pagan prostitute who hid the spies when Joshua led the invasion of Jericho (Joshua 2). Not exactly the poster child of morality. *Ruth* was a Moabite, the traditional enemy of Israel (Ruth 1:4). *Bathsheba* married a Hittite and had an affair with King David (2 Samuel 11:3–4). All of them were noted for some kind of scandal.

Mary fits right in, at least in public opinion. She was an unwed teen mother in a small village. She felt the heated glare of her peers. She knew the sting of gossip. The pain felt by Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba was native to her soul as well. Like the others, she kept the faith for future generations.

Lessons from the Genealogy

God uses people to accomplish his purposes. God doesn’t typically intervene with miracles; he invests in relationships. He walks with each of us to develop us into difference makers. God uses our gifts and successes, but he can also turn our failures into faith. Regardless of your past, God has a plan for your life. And though the jumbled mess of circumstances seems arbitrary, we see the tapestry only from the underside. When we rise to God’s perspective, we see his intricate, extraordinary design in the details—*all* the details—of our lives.

The people God uses are fallible. The women in this genealogy offer a ray of hope for everyone. Tamar and Bathsheba survived the trauma of sexual sin caused by the abuse of powerful men. We don’t know Rahab’s background, but it is unlikely prostitution was her chosen profession. She was probably a victim of poverty or culturally sanctioned human trafficking. As is so often the case, their sin was not just what they did but what was done to them. And Ruth was a victim of the tragic death of her husband, compounded by racism. Yet God redeemed the pain of these women by including them in his plan. He will do the same with you. You can play a part in sacred history! Your name will not be included in Scripture, but

there is a book of life in heaven being inscribed right this moment. Your name could be included there as part of the lineage of Jesus. You have a verse to contribute, and it has eternity written all over it. You have a role to play, regardless of the pain of your past.

Jesus is God's Son. Humanly, Jesus was Mary's son. Legally, he was Joseph's son by adoption. Fundamentally, he was God's Son. "Like Father, like Son" has never been truer than in the case of Jesus. Though he stepped into human history through a very real genealogy, he came from the Father's side, from heaven to earth. The story of Jesus is both eternal and historical. He is the bridge that spans the divide between our physical realities and the eternity we sense in our souls. Through him, we rise beyond our own genealogies to a forever future with God.

Life is not random. It may feel as if our relationships are disconnected and our choices make no difference. As if all is chance. But this "boring" genealogy betrays the truth that God has a plan *and* that you are part of it. Matthew meticulously catalogued this list of names, but it was God who wove it together over two thousand years. Generation by generation, God has been orchestrating a plan to restore the beauty of Eden. Wonder of all wonders, you are part of that plan.

Key Points

- Genealogies tell the story of salvation.
- In Matthew's genealogy, we see God's meticulous plan of salvation.
- The inclusion of the women in the genealogy reminds us that all are invited to play a role in God's drama of salvation.

This Week

- Day 1 (Eyes):** After reading the essay, consider this question:
How would you like God to describe your contribution to the story of salvation?
- Day 2 (Ears):** Read the story of Rahab in Joshua 2 and 6.
What are the similarities between her life and yours? Her faith and yours?
- Day 3 (Heart):** What was it about Rahab that made her such a model of faith according to Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25?
Relate that to Galatians 4:4.
- Day 4 (Voice):** Discussion:
 - Share a bit of your family history. Where did your family come from? Was there anyone famous or infamous in your extended family?
 - What strengths and weaknesses did you inherit from your father and mother?
 - What verse would you like God to write about your contribution to the story of salvation?
 - What barriers might keep you from fulfilling your verse? What resources or skills will you need to acquire or develop to fulfill your verse?
- Day 5 (Hands):** Do one thing this week to acquire a resource or develop a skill you listed in the previous question.

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3

Can God Use Me for Big Things?

Biblical Concept: Annunciation

Read: Luke 1:26–45

It matters whether our lives matter. The desire to leave a mark on the world is a universal human longing. This is not arrogance. It is spiritual genetics. This impulse for significance comes from the Creator himself. He wove it into our spiritual DNA. It drives the majority of decisions we make: what teams we root for, what occupations we choose, what relationships we build. It matters that we matter.

The difficulty, however, is that our goals are typically loftier than our character. We want to be better than we actually are. This is certainly true for me. If you scratch just beneath the surface, you'll expose my insecurity. I want to make a difference, but I doubt my ability to do much that matters. That's why the story of Mary is so inspiring. She shows us the way to do big things for God. By examining her example, we can follow a path toward significance.

God's Call, Not Our Character

Mary is venerated all over the world for her faith. Yet there is a huge gap between her biography and her legacy. What God intended for her was far beyond her provincial circumstances. We see this contrast in the very first sentence of this passage: Gabriel was an archangel; Mary lived in Nazareth, a backwater village disdained by the locals (John 1:46). She was a peasant girl, and her fiancé was a day laborer. Yet God chose her to bear his own Son.

No wonder she was confused when Gabriel greeted her: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28). She couldn’t figure out why such an important messenger had been sent to her. She was not just confused; she was concerned. Gabriel had to put her at ease to even have the conversation: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (verse 30).

There is an important lesson here: *the impact of your life is determined not by your ability or your history but by God’s call*. You may doubt your ability and question your character, but God has a plan for you that is based on his goodness, not yours. Mary was willing to submit her life to God’s plan. That is the single qualification any of us needs to be used by God for big things.

God's Power; Our Willingness

Gabriel made a wonderful and horrible announcement. Mary was going to have a child. That’s wonderful. Not just any child—an extraordinary child. Gabriel had to stretch superlatives to adequately describe the Christ child. He began with a simple statement that this child would be great. How great? Well, he would be Mary’s son by birth but God’s Son by vocation. That means he would sit on David’s throne as the greatest king of Hebrew history. More than that, he would reign over the house of Jacob, the father of all Israel. Hence, he would be the greatest patriarch of God’s people as well as the greatest monarch in the nation’s history. In fact, his

kingdom would extend into eternity, having no boundaries in space and time.

Mary asked, “How will this be?” (verse 34). After all, virgins don’t give birth. That’s obvious enough. She may have been an ancient peasant, but she knew how babies were made. Nonetheless, the God who spoke life into existence could certainly populate a single womb with a word. The Spirit that hovered over the chaotic waters (Genesis 1:2) could generate life in the womb of a virgin. As the angel Gabriel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Just so we are clear, this was asexual. It was not God cohabitating with a human as was common in Greek mythology. This was creation, not cohabitation. It was the power of God coming upon Mary, creating life in her womb as he had done with his word in Genesis 1.

Was this unprecedented? Well, it had never happened before. So yes, it was unprecedented, but it was not unpredicted. The ancient prophet had promised that God would invade our space (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6–7). He would come to us in a way that was knowable, relatable, and accessible. It was the only way for humans to truly connect with the divine. We cannot get to him; he must come to us. And we see it in the baby’s name, *Jesus*. This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name *Joshua*, which means “Yahweh saves.” In the ancient days, Joshua was the Hebrew hero that led Israel into the promised land. Jesus does globally what Joshua did nationally. Joshua led a single people into the promised land; Jesus leads the whole world to the new earth. Joshua saved his people by destroying their enemies; Jesus saved his enemies by sacrificing himself. Joshua fought with a sword; Jesus won with a cross. By his death, he saved our souls; by his resurrection, he overpowered the grave. Gabriel’s promise is phenomenal!

Yet Gabriel’s promise also has a horrible element because Mary was betrothed. In Jewish culture, betrothal was a legally binding agreement. If this teenage bride-to-be wound up pregnant, the contract would be nullified. In fact, her very life could be jeopardized. According to the Mosaic

law, Mary could be stoned for adultery if she were unfaithful to her fiancé (Leviticus 20:10). Best-case scenario, her reputation would be trashed. She would be judged a tramp, which was devastating in a village like Nazareth. Nonetheless, she did not protest or barter. Without hesitation, she replied, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Read that carefully. She was *wishing* that God’s will would prevail regardless of the cost. She was willing to risk her life to carry out God’s will. Is this not the very nature of the son she would bear? Perhaps that is why God chose her of all maidens.

That is the secret of God using any of us for big things. It’s not about our ability but about our willingness to submit to God’s will. He can use you if you’re willing to sacrifice. Would you risk your relationships to do something big for God? It may take that. Would you sacrifice your comfort to leave a legacy? It will demand that. Would you risk your reputation to make a difference for God? There is no other path into God’s purpose than an unqualified “Let it be to me.”

God’s Provision

All this was overwhelming for Mary. In the days ahead, she would wrestle with doubt and difficulties. She would face ridicule and rejection from family and friends. God knew what she was up against. That is why he gave Mary two things he will *always* give you when you accept the challenge of his call: *a reason to believe God* and *a relationship to sustain you*.

Elizabeth was a relative of Mary. She was old and barren. Yet by the miraculous hand of God, she was pregnant with John the Baptist. The young virgin Mary took a sixty-mile hike to visit her. Twice the text specifies that it was the sixth month. Sixth month of what? Elizabeth’s pregnancy. At the beginning of Elizabeth’s third trimester, Mary arrived at her door. Mary was so barely pregnant that she might not have even missed her first period. Yet the moment they met, the fetus in Elizabeth recognized Jesus in Mary’s womb and leaped for joy (verse 41). Notice how specific Elizabeth was: “Why is this granted to me that the mother of my

Lord should come to me?” (verse 43). That is a lot of freight to put on a zygote. Truly Elizabeth spoke truth: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (verse 45).

Mary would stay with Elizabeth for the next three months, likely until John was born. She was a witness to the faithfulness of God. Mary was sustained by Elizabeth’s mentoring. God provided clear evidence of his sovereign hand. He provided the loving touch of an understanding elder. Those three months gave Mary the strength she needed to return home, to face Joseph, and to endure a difficult pregnancy. Let this be a lesson to us. If God calls you to a task, he will provide what you need to accomplish it. He will always give you enough evidence to believe and the mentor you need to fulfill your call.

There will be days of doubt when you question your call. In those days, look back to the promises of God, look around at his faithful provision, and look forward to the rewards of being used by God for big things. The people God has put in our lives and the reminders of his sovereign plan are all around if we just lift our eyes from our present pain to absorb the eternal goodness of God. You can do anything he calls you to if you will only say, “Let it be to me.”

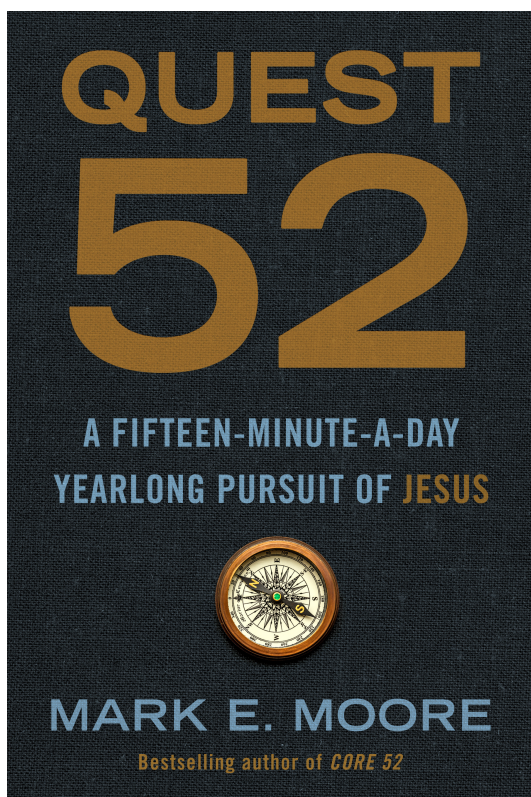
Key Points

- The impact of your life is determined not by your ability or your history but by God’s call.
- To do great things for God, we must relinquish our wills and be willing to say, “Let it be to me.”
- When God calls you to a task, he will provide both a reason to believe and a relationship to sustain you.

This Week

- Day 1 (Eyes):** As you read the essay, what similarities did you see between your situation and Mary's?
- Day 2 (Ears):** Read Isaiah 9:1–7. What descriptions of Jesus are found in this prophecy?
- Day 3 (Heart):** Meditate on Colossians 1:15–17; Hebrews 1:3; Revelation 1:8. What do these verses say about the eternal Christ?
- Day 4 (Voice):** Discussion:
 - Who are the heroes in your life that led you to a place where you could believe? These could be family members, mentors, or peers.
 - If you were Mary, what would be your greatest concerns about accepting God's call? What are your greatest concerns about your own calling?
 - What is God calling you to do with your life to bring him glory?
 - What are the obstacles keeping you from your next step in fulfilling God's plan for you?
- Day 5 (Hands):** Write a brief description (three sentences) of what you perceive God wants to do with your life over the next three to five years. Now list three action steps you need to take this year to move toward that goal.

Further Resources: Quest52.com/3



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