

1999 Advent Week 3 - Mary Magdalene

by John Piper

The sermon explores the transformative power of Jesus in the life of Mary Magdalene, highlighting themes of redemption and faith amidst darkness.

Duration: 14:09

Scripture: Matthew 11:28-30, Matthew 20:22, Mark 5:6-8, Mark 5:15, Mark 5:18-20, Luke 8:2, John 8:36

Topics: "Spiritual Transformation", "Healing Ministry"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Mary Magdalene and her encounter with Jesus. Mary, who had been possessed by seven demons, is freed by Jesus and becomes a devoted follower. The preacher emphasizes the power of Jesus to heal and transform lives, using Mary as an example. The sermon also touches on the story of Herod Antipas and his fear of John the Baptist, highlighting the consequences of rejecting God's word.

Transcript

There are two advent poems remaining which will deal with Mary Magdalene. And what we know from the Bible that is relevant is that she had seven demons cast out of her. That's what the Bible says.

And she ministered following Jesus in a team of women, another of whom was Joanna, whose husband was Chusa, who was a steward of Herod the Tetrarch. So much the Bible, the rest is imagination. Mary Magdalene, part one.

The town of Magdala beside the sea could boast the pride of second place in Herod's heart after Tiberias. Apart from all its fishing fame, a story fastened to its name that every little child knew by heart, but very, very few could tell the meaning of the tale. The story goes that once a trail from Egypt led to Galilee, and men from Migdal by the sea beyond brought sacred stones and built a tower with the mud and silt of chinnereth to hold the bones in place.

And all the human bones of priests and holy men were stored inside. And far above this hoard of holy relics, at the peak, there lived a hawk with piercing beak and seven eyes. And from his place above the sea, he turned his face from south to west and north to east, and there all seeing never ceased to guard the ancient shrine and spire called Magdala.

No foreign fire could pierce the shield of seven eyes or strike the tower in disguise from any point on earth till one dark night. It was as if the sun flashed for a moment in the sky and lightning made the tower lie in ruins with ten thousand stones thrown down with all their holy bones. These things the children knew by heart, and sculptors turned them into art, and bards would make them into rhymes, and dancers into baffling mimes.

But none could say what these things meant, except a few who claimed descent from those whose bones were buried there, a tiny cult around the heir of Magdala. Four miles along the coast stood glorious and strong the capital Tiberias, the home of Herod Antipas. And here, unknown to all his land and even to his wife, he planned his every move with counsel from the cult of Magdala.

And some advisors thought it strange that he would spend his time with three unlikely counselors at night behind closed doors. Herodias, his brother's wife in spite of court and market rife with rumors, Cusa, steward to the king who took his every cue from Herod's whim, and finally a slave girl bought from ancestry in Magdala, who all agreed had lost her mind and couldn't read or write or even speak. It was believed.

And thus the people were deceived and simply thought the king sleeps with Herodias, though she is Kith. And Cusa has his own cuisine, the slave called Mary Magdalene. But there was deeper evil here, as oft there is when sex and fear consort to turn the crushing wheel of providence and boldly deal in demon oracles.

The cult of Magdala was this. Consult the ancient Horus, fathered by Osiris and his sister, high above the clouds of Egypt long ago and soaring as a strong all-seeing hawk with seven eyes to favor man or maid who lies down with another's spouse. And so the favor comes and seven demons go from Horus into her whose name is like the Tower of Ancient Fame in Magdala.

And in the night, filled sevenfold with demon sight, the mindless Magdalene can speak and tells the king of those who seek his throne and how he might proceed to keep his life and save his seed. Thus, year by year, the king unlocks the secrets of his foes. A fox, they call him, and his power grows.

He marries Philip's wife and goes more public with his cultic mind and claims that sometimes one can find that prophets come back from the dead. Then one day, Herod's secret dread starts to unfold. A prophet has appeared in Galilee.

And as Elijah frightened Ahab once, this man named John the Baptist hunts for sin in kings the way a hound tracks foxes on the open ground. So one night, Herod called the cult of Magdala and said, Consult now, Mary, with your hawk and gods and tell me truly if the odds are high that John the Baptist will destroy my throne. And should I kill him in the field or put the hound in chains? Her sunken eyes were round with fright.

And she began to shake. The seven eyes of Horus make me fear, she said. What do you see, the king inquired.

Now speak to me, you hollow-headed witch. What do you see? It's dark, she said. All through the land, it's dark.

And then, as though the brilliant sun flashed down below the clouds for just a moment there, the midnight sky was everywhere ablaze with light. And on the land, by human mind and art unplanned, as far as I

could see strewn stones in disarray and ashen bones, then darkness once again. What more, the king demanded.

What's in store for me? Whose bones are these? What light that shines out like the sun at night? And whence these stones strewn everywhere? Speak now, enchantress, or I swear I'll throw you to the bones you have seen. And in the dark you'll rue the night you defied the king. But Mary's tongue had taken wing.

And seven demons spurned the rage of Herod Antipas, his house, his wage, his bed, his roof, his bread. And that night, Mary Magdalene lay flat and bleeding on a reddish stone where she was whipped half dead and thrown to die outside the city gate alone and there to demonstrate what happens when a sorceress insults the king. Her simple dress was shredded now and fever shook her fragile frame and darkness took her hope away that anyone might find her there, as if the sun could shine at midnight by the Sea of Genereth in Galilee.

The hours went by, then suddenly she heard a sound and tried to see what stirred. And just before the dawn she saw two figures as if drawn like silhouettes in black against the sky. In fear, her muscles tensed as one of them approached and said, Is that you, Mary? Are you dead or do you live? She answered, It is I, and who are you? Unfit to save your soul, nor even life.

What is your name? Joanna, wife of Cusa. Mary moaned, Unfit to save because you'd rather spit on Cusa's concubine? Why have you come? First, Mary, here is salve to clean your wounds and water for your fevered throat. Joanna tore a cloth and cleaned the crusty blood from Mary's back.

There's lots more crud inside than you can clean with oil and medicine, if you should toil a thousand years. It took that long for me to get this way. How strong are you, Joanna? Horus and his seven hawk-like demons stand against the strongest alchemy.

I know, Joanna said, and we must not engage beyond the length of our skill, but there is one whose strength is greater than your Horus and his hawk-like gods, and none can stand against his word. And where is he? she asked Joanna. If I see him, will he punish me? I think he'd rather make you free to drink at springs of life, all sound and dressed in robes of joy and unpossessed.

His name is Jesus. When I learned what happened with the king, I yearned for you to meet the one who made me whole, and so I went and prayed that he would come, and he agreed. Oh, Mary, look and see what he can do for you.

The Lord approached the bloody stone where sword and scourge had taken life for ten dark centuries gone by, and then he raised his hand by Jesus' wife to make the stone a place of life. Before the Lord could speak a word, the demons made her like a bird with fingers like the talons on a hawk, and all her muscles drawn like bowstrings ready for the fight, and screeching voice combining fright and insolence. We know your name, they screamed.

You are the Christ, the same old holy one of God who cast us out of heaven ages past and split the midnight sky with light and shattered all the towering might of Magdala. Then Jesus said, Be silent, seven eyes. The dead, they're in the tombs.

Behold, you get your last abode until the net of wrath removes your last desire and casts you in the lake of fire. The seven demons overthrown, now Mary crumples to the stone, and Jesus reaches out his hand and touches her. Come, Mary, stand.

Instead, she crawls and clasps his feet and weeps with heaving sobs and sweet, as if a thousand years of chains were cut away and deepest stains were clean and all her mind were given back to her, inclined another way. Now cease to hold my feet, he says, for it is told of old that I must drink my cup. Then gently Jesus lifts her up and says, For this I must be free like you.

Now come and follow me. And so, sweet fire of candle three that burns so bright and painfully, come, light the midnight of our days and strike the towers of our ways. And when we think our chains are strong and slavery has been too long and wicked ropes are bound too tight and demons lurk beneath your sight, think not that we are too unclean.

Remember Mary Magdalene. Come, sweetly, painful flame, and be the fire that sets the captive free.

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