

GOSPEL

The Good News Of Christmas is That God Does The Impossible!

December 10, 2017

Luke 1:26-38

Birth of Jesus Foretold

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed[a] to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"[b] 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"[c]

35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born[d] will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant[e] of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

John came first. He was the forerunner—the messenger sent ahead to announce the coming of the King. Then came Jesus—his Majesty, the King—to seek and to save the lost. In the opening chapters of Luke their stories are laid out side by side for comparison and contrast. John and Jesus: two cousins, two pregnancies, two hymns of praise, and two deliveries at the beginning of two great lives.

The similarities between the two stories are striking. Both John and Jesus were born to godly women who apart from divine intervention were unable to bear children. Writing in the fourth century, Maximus of Turin described how “Mary, conscious of her virginity, marvels at the fruit hidden in her belly, while Elizabeth, conscious of her old age, blushes that her womb is heavy with the one she has conceived.” The births of both cousins were announced by the same awesome angel, who told people not to be afraid, proclaimed the birth of a son, gave each child his name, and explained his mission in life. The people who heard these announcements—Zechariah the priest and Mary the virgin—questioned the angel and were given a confirming sign.

Yet for all their similarities, what Luke mainly wants us to see are the differences. Like a white paint chip next to an off-white paint chip, the comparison is made to show the contrast. So who is greater: John or Jesus? John’s mother was barren; the mother of Jesus had never been with a man at all. John would be a prophet crying in the wilderness; Jesus would reign on David’s everlasting throne. John would be “great before the Lord” (Luke 1:15). Jesus would be “great” without qualification (Luke 1:32), the Son of the Most High God. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit, but Jesus would be *conceived* by the Holy Spirit. John would prepare for God’s coming, but when Jesus came, God was there, in the flesh. Who is greater: John or Jesus? Luke argues from the lesser to the greater to give more glory to Jesus. Jesus was like John, but superior in every respect—infinately superior.

GABRIEL’S GREETING

The birth of Jesus, like the birth of John, was announced by the angel Gabriel, who began with a greeting: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’ ” (Luke 1:26–28).

It is doubtful whether Gabriel could have found a more unlikely person to greet anywhere in Israel. Mary was among the lowly. She was young—possibly as young as twelve or thirteen years old, in that awkward stage between childhood and womanhood. Like many people in Israel, she was a poor, uneducated peasant living in a small country town far from the center of power. As people said in those days, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). Mary was also a female in a culture that discounted women. From a merely human perspective, she was insignificant. Kent Hughes calls her “a nobody in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere.”

Yet Mary was given the greatest honor that any woman has ever been given. She was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, and her lowly estate was part of God's plan. By choosing Mary, God was beginning to show what humiliation his Son would have to endure for the salvation of sinners. Martin Luther observed that God might well "have gone to Jerusalem and picked out Caiaphas's daughter, who was fair, rich, clad in gold embroidered raiment and attended by a retinue of maids in waiting. But God preferred a lowly maid from a mean town." God preferred this because the plan of salvation required Jesus to humble himself, and only then to be exalted. To rescue us from our sins and lift us to glory, Jesus first had to enter into the misery of our lost and fallen condition. What better way to show what he had come to do than for him to be born to a woman like Mary from a town like Nazareth?

God's grace is for the lowly. God certainly showed grace to Mary. This is the meaning of the angel's salutation: "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28). With these words, Gabriel pronounced God's benediction on Mary. God was with her to bless her, not because of her own merit, but because of his grace. The word the angel used for "favor" (*kecharitōmenē*) comes from the Greek word for "grace" (*charis*). It means to be treated with undeserved kindness. Martin Luther paraphrased Gabriel's greeting like this: "O Mary, you are blessed. You have a gracious God. No woman has ever lived on earth to whom God has shown such grace."

The angel's greeting has often been misunderstood. Gabriel was not worshiping Mary; nor did he say that she was "full of grace." These ideas come from a prayer commonly used by Roman Catholics: "Hail Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus, Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of death." This is not a biblical prayer, although it has some biblical language in it. The problem is that it treats Mary as the *source* of grace rather than as an *object* of grace. People pray to Mary because they think she has grace to give. But the phrase "full of grace" is based on a Latin translation (the Vulgate) that is really a *mistranslation*. Even Roman Catholic Bible scholars admit this, although most still think that Christians should pray to Mary. What the Bible actually says is that Mary was the *recipient* of God's grace, not a *repository* of grace. The word that the English Standard Version rightly translates as "favored one" is a passive participle. In other words, it refers to the grace that Mary was given by God, and not to any grace that she can give to others.

It is important to know what to believe about Mary because so many people go wrong at this point. The Bible never says that Mary was without sin, that she remained a virgin, or that she is able to give grace to sinners. We can only imagine how much it would grieve her to know that some people worship her! What the Bible does say—beyond the fact that she was the mother of Jesus—is that she was saved by grace. The way Mary helps us is not by giving us grace, but by showing that God can give us the same kind of grace that he gave to her. Mary is the blessed virgin, who alone was called to give birth to the Son of God. Her experience is not our experience; nevertheless, her example *is* for us. Since she received grace from God, her example proves that God shows unmerited favor to lowly sinners. Even when we feel small and insignificant, overlooked by the world, we can know that God is for

us. Gabriel's greeting shows God's grace for the lowly.

THE ANGEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT

What the angel said was meant to be reassuring, yet Mary was still troubled. She wasn't hysterical, as some teenagers might have been, but she was more than a little upset. As Luke tells it, "She was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29). Naturally Mary wanted to know what this meant. What was happening? Why was an angel talking to her? What had he come to say?

Gabriel did not leave Mary in suspense, but followed his greeting with an announcement. The announcement—which came in two parts because it was divided by Mary's question in verse 34—began as follows: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30–33).

With these words, the angel announced the greatest event in human history: the coming of the Son of God. First Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid, because she had found favor with God. "Favor" is a different form of the same word that the angel used in verse 28: *charin*, which is the Greek word for grace. God was showing unmerited favor to Mary; by his grace she would give birth to a son.

Then Gabriel proceeded to explain the significance of this child, telling about his person and work. Who was he? What would he do? The angel told Mary to call his name Jesus, which means "God saves," or "the Lord is salvation." This was the first hint that Jesus would be the Savior. He would bring salvation to sinners by dying on the cross in shame and then rising again in glory. Even from the announcement of his birth, his name testified to his saving work. Jesus is the salvation of God.

Next the angel said that Jesus would be "great." When Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, he said that John the Baptist would be "great before the Lord" (Luke 1:15). But Jesus *is* the Lord, so when Gabriel said that he would "be great," he did not limit his greatness in any way. Jesus is great. In the Old Testament, whenever this word is used without qualification, it almost always refers to God himself. God's wisdom is great; his works are great; his power is great; his mercy is great (e.g., Ps. 92:5; 103:11). So great is God's greatness that he alone deserves to be called "great." By saying that Jesus would be great, therefore, Gabriel was testifying to the deity of Jesus Christ. No one is greater than he is. Jesus is great in wisdom, great in power, great in love, and great in the majesty of his divine being. His greatness is the greatness of God.

Already we see the strange juxtaposition of meekness and majesty that define the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He was born in the humblest of circumstances. While on earth

he suffered the humiliation of poverty, loneliness, homelessness, rejection, persecution, and torture. Jesus humbled himself to the very death. Yet he was still the divine Son of God, and God exalted him back to greatness by raising him from the dead. We usually get this backwards. We exalt ourselves, trying to make ourselves greater than we are, and then God has to humble us. Jesus did the exact opposite: he humbled himself and let God do the exalting. In fact, this was part of his greatness. Later, when the disciples wanted to know who was the greatest, Jesus said, “He who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48). God does not define greatness by status, but by service (see Luke 22:27). Jesus was the greatest because by his sacrifice on the cross he became the servant of all.

After testifying to his greatness, the angel said that Jesus would be called “the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). Gabriel used similar terminology a few moments later, calling Jesus “the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). “The Most High” was a favorite expression of King David, who used this title to praise the Lord (e.g., Ps. 7:17). Here Gabriel identifies Jesus as the *Son* of the Most High God. This phrase could be used for any child of God. There is a sense in which every believer is a son or daughter of the Most High. But this title belongs to Jesus in a unique way. Divine sonship is his eternal identity as the Second Person of the Trinity—God the eternal Son. There is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What Luke gradually reveals—in Jesus’ conception (Luke 1:35), at his baptism (Luke 3:22), at his transfiguration (Luke 9:35), and in his resurrection (Acts 13:33)—is that Jesus of Nazareth is God the Son. What joy it must have given Gabriel to announce this mystery for the very first time, declaring that Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity, the divine Son of God.

Gabriel also said that Jesus would rule in majesty, sitting on the ancient throne of David. As Luke has already indicated (Luke 1:27), his earthly father Joseph came from the house of David, which meant that Jesus was David’s rightful heir. Long ago God had promised David that his son would have a kingdom that would never end: “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.... Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:13–14, 16). These ancient promises were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is the son of David and Israel’s eternal King.

This was the angel’s announcement: Mary would give birth to a son named Jesus, who would be the great Savior and the Son of God, the most powerful ruler in the history of the world. Do you trust the angel’s promise? It was written so that you would know for sure—so that you would believe in Jesus as your Savior, worship him as your great God, and serve him as your everlasting King.

MARY’S QUESTION

Mary believed the angel’s prophecy, but she still had a question: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34).

Mary obviously understood the angel to say that her child would be conceived before she got married. As everyone knows, she was engaged to Joseph. In those days a betrothal

was formalized in a public ceremony and generally lasted for a year, during which the bride was sometimes referred to as the man's wife. But the couple did not live together, and they did not have sexual relations, for in those days "an engagement was regarded as a definite promise of mutual fidelity and its violation was looked upon as adultery."⁹

Since she was a godly woman, Mary was saving herself for marriage. She was preserving her sexual purity as a prize, the way every woman should. But this raised an obvious question. How could she conceive and bear a son if she had never been with a man? Mary knew enough about the reproductive process to know that this was impossible. So she had to ask: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Mary did not ask this question in unbelief. Here Luke is drawing a clear contrast between Zechariah's doubt and Mary's faith. When old Zechariah received the promise of a son, he asked, "How shall I *know* this?" (Luke 1:18). He wasn't sure whether to believe the angel or not, so he wanted some kind of confirmation. Mary asked a completely different question: "How will this be?" (Luke 1:34). In other words, she wanted to know how it would happen. Unlike Zechariah, she believed that the angel's promise would come true. But she was still curious to know *how* it would happen, and perhaps to know whether there was anything she needed to do.

It was a good, honest question, and Gabriel gave her the answer, as well as a sign to confirm the promise: "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. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:35–37).

As a good historian, Luke gives us the facts: Mary's son would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Like a good physician, he also puts these facts into their medical context, telling us that Elizabeth was getting close to the end of her second trimester. The story of Jesus and his birth is not some bizarre myth. It is not, as some Bible scholars say, "a collection of largely uncertain, mutually contradictory, strongly legendary" accounts. This is factual history, and what the facts declare is one of the most stupendous miracles God has ever performed: the virgin birth of Jesus Christ.

Mary asked the same question that people still ask today: How can this be? How can a woman become pregnant without having sexual relations? The answer is very simple—if you believe in the power of God. The answer is that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. This is the miracle of the virgin birth that Christians have always confessed. We say it in the Apostles' Creed: "he was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary." We also say it in the Nicene Creed: God the Son "was incarnated by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man." This is how Mary had a son. The child in her womb came from the Holy Spirit: "Her pregnancy is an act of divine grace, explicable not in terms of human insemination ... but in terms of the creative power of the Holy Spirit."

Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would “overshadow” her. This language echoes the Old Testament and reminds us that the Holy Spirit has been actively involved in everything that God has ever done. The Spirit was present at creation, when he overshadowed the waters of the earth (Gen. 1:2). The Spirit was there at the exodus, when he overshadowed the tabernacle in a cloud of glory (Ex. 40:34–35). Later the Spirit would overshadow Jesus, anointing him for his earthly ministry. It was by the Spirit that Jesus made atonement for our sins (Heb. 9:14), and by the Spirit that he was raised from the dead (Rom. 1:4). Then Jesus sent the Spirit to overshadow the church (Acts 1:8); it is by the power of his presence that we serve Christ today. The Holy Spirit has been overshadowing God’s people from the very beginning, working with the Father and the Son for our salvation.

But no work of the Spirit is more miraculous than the work he did in Mary’s womb, enabling the virgin to give birth to the Son of God. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is one of the essential facts and great mysteries of the Christian religion. If we deny this, we deny the faith. According to Luke, Mary had a child before she had intercourse. Do we believe this, or not? If we say that Jesus was *not* born of a virgin, then either we believe that Mary was sexually immoral, or that Luke was a writer of fiction, or both. In any case, we defame the character of these godly people and contradict the plain teaching of Scripture.

Even worse, we deny the deity of Jesus Christ, because it is his conception by the Holy Spirit that makes him the holy Son of God. Jesus had to be born of a woman to be a man. But if he had been the physical offspring of Joseph, then he would have been nothing more than a man. His virgin birth, his divine conception by the Spirit—these things were necessary for his incarnation. Only the virgin birth preserves the humanity *and* the deity of Jesus Christ. His conception by the Spirit points to his deity. His birth from a woman points to his humanity. One person, two natures—a divine nature and a human nature. And because he was conceived by a unique creative act of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was not corrupted by the guilt of Adam. Fallen humanity could not produce its own Savior; he had to come from somewhere outside, by way of divine initiative and intervention. Therefore, God sent Jesus into the world as the perfect Son of God, born without sin.

In case she had any trouble believing, God gave Mary a sign. Unlike Zechariah, she had not asked for a sign, but God gave her one just the same. It was a sign that proved his sovereignty over the womb. Mary’s relative Elizabeth—barren old Elizabeth—was six months pregnant! The angel told Mary this to prove the power of God, which he declared in a memorable phrase: “Nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37; cf. Gen. 18:14). God was able to bring a child from a barren womb. If he was able to do this, then by the power of his Holy Spirit he could just as well make a virgin conceive and bear a son. And if God could perform the miracle of the virgin birth, then he is quite capable of handling the difficulties of our daily lives. Nothing is impossible with God. This is a verse to live by. As J. C. Ryle has said, “A hearty reception of this great principle is of immense importance to our own inward peace.”

Is there anything in your life that seems impossible? Perhaps it seems impossible for your great sin to be forgiven, especially after all the times you have tried not to do it again, but failed. Perhaps it seems impossible for your family to be restored after all the heartbreak and for joy to come again. Maybe it seems impossible for your physical and financial needs to be met, or for your work, your studies, or your ministry to succeed. It may seem impossible to endure the suffering that has come into your life, or for someone you love to come to Christ. But the Bible says, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” He is the God of the virgin birth! There is no sin he cannot forgive, no relationship he cannot reconcile, no problem he cannot resolve, no need he cannot meet, no ministry he cannot bless, no grief he cannot comfort, no life he cannot reclaim, no sinner he cannot save. The God of the virgin birth is the God who makes all things possible.

MARY’S RESPONSE

Do you believe this? Mary believed it, and what a difference it made in her life. Her encounter with the angel ends with her great confession of faith: “Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:38).

The Bible says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Mary had that assurance. Unlike Zechariah, meeting an angel did not leave her speechless. On the contrary, she was able to confess her faith and accept God’s call. In the words of Maximus of Turin, “[Zechariah] lost his voice because he doubted. But [Mary], because she believed immediately, conceived the saving Word.” She was able to do this because she took God at his word. She said, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Mary did not raise any objections. She did not hold out for an easier calling. She did not ask God to explain what would happen later if she said yes. All she needed to know was what God wanted her to do. Once she knew, that was enough for her; she was ready to do it!

How rare it is to find someone who is willing to trust God for the impossible and then obey him without hesitation or qualification. Even some of the great heroes of the faith tried to wiggle out of doing what God said. Think of Moses, who asked God to send someone else to lead the exodus (Ex. 4:13). Or of Gideon, who said he couldn’t deliver Israel because he was the weakest man from the weakest tribe (Judg. 6:15). Or of Jeremiah, who said he was too young for the job (Jer. 1:6). But Mary was a woman of great faith. She understood that once we know what God wants us to do, any delay is a sign of unbelief. In the words of the English bishop Joseph Hall, “All disputations with God after His will is known, arise from infidelity. There is not a more noble proof of faith than ... without all questionings to go blindfold whither He will lead us.”

Mary trusted God, even when it seemed impossible. In her own words, she was “the servant of the Lord” (Luke 1:38). The word “servant” could also be translated “slave.” Mary was identifying herself as God’s bondservant, his handmaiden. She wanted to offer God

humble, trusting, submissive obedience. She was committed to doing whatever she was told to do. Her calling was to serve.

This was a great honor—the greatest honor that any woman has ever been given. To this day, Mary is blessed as the mother of Jesus. But her service also led to great suffering. To accept the virgin birth, Mary had to be willing to give up almost everything she knew and loved. She had to be willing to give up Joseph, the man she was engaged to marry. How could he consent to take her as his wife if she was pregnant with a child that was not his own? She had to be willing to give up her reputation. Imagine the village gossip in a town like Nazareth, where everyone would wonder who the father was. To be frank, there would always be some people who would call her son a bastard. Some might even say that she deserved to die, because the law demanded the death penalty whenever a woman who was engaged was convicted of adultery (Deut. 22:23–24).

There were other trials as well. There were all the physical pains that went with pregnancy and childbirth. There were also many hardships that Mary could not have predicted: the journey to Bethlehem, the exile in Egypt, the hatred of Herod. But the greatest suffering came when Jesus grew to be a man and began to fulfill his ministry. There was so much controversy surrounding Jesus that at one point the family tried to get him to go to another part of the country, or even to leave the ministry altogether (Mark 3:21). It was obvious that he was on a collision course with death. And at the very end Mary had to endure his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion, and his bloody burial. This is what it meant for Mary to submit to God's will for her life. When she said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), she was consenting to a lifetime of suffering for the glory of God.

All of this leads David Gooding to wonder how Mary did it. He marvels that "an ordinary human girl of flesh and blood believed [that God could perform the impossible miracle of the virgin birth], and went on believing it, and bore the incalculable honour and the immeasurable burden without losing faith and nerve and proper humility and sanity itself." How did she do it? How was she able to offer such costly service? The answer is that Mary did it by faith. She trusted God for all of it—her relationship with Joseph, her reputation in town, her physical suffering, and the anguish of her soul. Mary believed in God and followed him with trusting obedience.

This is what it means to be a Christian. Indeed, we might even say that Mary was the first Christian, for a Christian is simply a person who believes in Jesus and says, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." This means trusting God for our relationships—romantic and otherwise—not trying to make them go the way we want them to go, but letting God lead. It means trusting God in our daily work, allowing him to see to our success. It means trusting God for ministry, being content with whatever blessing he brings, or doesn't bring, as long as we are faithful. It means trusting God for our families, asking him to carry our burden for the people we love. It means trusting God with our troubles—the impossible things we have to face. And it means trusting God when we

suffer reproach, as Mary did. If we follow God, then people will be as opposed to us as they are to him, but by faith we will continue to follow him.

Are you willing to be God's servant? Then surrender to his will and submit to his word. Give up control, putting things into his hands rather than bending them to your own purpose. Live for God no matter what other people think. And do this even if it means suffering for the cause of Christ. By the grace of God, through faith in Christ and by the work of his Holy Spirit, we are able to say what Mary said: "Have it your way, Lord, not mine—I am ready to do your will."¹

¹ Ryken, P. G. (2009). *Luke*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (Vol. 1, pp. 28–40). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.