

A Sign from God

Luke 1:26-38

I always chuckle when I hear someone say, “We’re pregnant?” That expression has always humored me because, after all, it’s quite ridiculous. And yet I’ve heard many a man as well as women declare with a genuine intentional affection for one another, “We’re pregnant.”

But really, that’s absurd, isn’t it? I am a man. I have never been pregnant and I never will be. No other member of my gender can rightly say anything else. Pregnancy describes a unique characteristic of women, and is a particular blessing given by God to women alone.

Try as hard as we might in this so-called enlightened age, there are gender distinctions with which God has made us male and female. Further, Scripture speaks clearly about the different roles of men and women. A man and a woman are different, and they were created for different functions, biological and otherwise. Women conceive, which is to say, they become pregnant. In strictly biological terms, conception occurs when an egg is fertilized and implants within a woman’s body, beginning the 36 week development of a baby before being born. Conception is a work of women. The work of men is defined in Scripture by the word begetting.

So a woman is specially designed by God to conceive children. A man is specially designed by God to beget them. And as crucial as it is to distinguish those functions in our unisex age, when all distinctions between men and women are seen as unjustly discriminatory, it is all the more crucial to understand both conception and begetting when those terms related to Jesus. And that is our subject this morning. So let me say first that,

I. JESUS WAS CONCEIVED BY A WOMAN.

The language is clear.

v.31

I want to focus for a few minutes this morning upon this woman. Sometimes, I fear, we fail to emphasize the godliness of this great woman because we try so consciously to avoid some of what is taught by Roman Catholic doctrine. Indeed, there are many things about Mary defined by Roman Catholic tradition that have no basis in Scripture, but established merely by church authority. For example, her perpetual virginity. That even after marriage, she remained a virgin. Scripture speaks about Jesus’ biological brothers and sisters. Then there is the doctrine of her own immaculate conception, that she herself, at the first instant of her conception, was preserved immaculate from the stain of original sin. Pope Pius IX defined that doctrine in 1854. There is also the notion of her bodily assumption, that her body was raised from the grave shortly after she died, that her body and soul were reunited, and that she was taken up and enthroned as Queen of Heaven. That was defined as dogma to be believed by all the faithful by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

But none of that is found in the Bible, and we really ought to label it as superstition. For some, even, idolatry, leading many faithful Catholics to worship Mary, to pray to her and seek her intercession. “Hail, Mary...” as the familiar prayer begins.

But if we don’t believe all of that, what can we say about Mary? What should we say about her? And the simple answer is that she was a godly woman. A godly, faithful, honorable woman, who deeply loved God and willingly submitted herself to his will. She exhibits well the true feminine beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, so beautiful and so precious in the sight of God. May honor be given where honor is due.

A. Mary is characterized by godly virtue.

v.27

Mary is defined as a virgin. That word in English certainly means the same thing as the Greek word, as Mary defines herself in verse 34, “I do not know a man.” The meaning is clear, that she is a virgin.

Sadly, that word today typically has reference to inexperience rather than virtue. With the millennial generation, that inexperience is often seen negatively. We have certainly changed, and cheapened the meaning of the word. The word virgin, with all its biological implications, should be synonymous with “unmarried.” That is to say, Scripture assumes the natural and ordinary connection between those two things, and so the word takes on moral implications. A unmarried, virgin woman was a virtuous woman. An unmarried, virtuous woman was a virgin. She was a woman whose physical purity was intact, ready and able to become a faithful and virtuous wife whenever God would provide her a husband.

There is such a gentle, praiseworthy, and morally honorable blessing to be described in this way. There is nothing uncomfortable or inappropriate about this description. Rather, Mary is characterized by godly virtue. She is a virgin, betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal is a commitment of marriage, an agreement to marriage, made prior to the actual commitment and consummation of marriage. Betrothal is a far cry from the superficial commitments so common in modern day engagements, for betrothal actually corresponds to the first portion of the wedding ceremony. Betrothal is the first set of vows in a traditional wedding, the vows taken before the father gives away the bride, beginning with the groom, “Will you have this woman to be your lawful and wedded wife, to live with her after God's commandments in the holy estate of marriage?”

That's betrothal. An agreement and commitment to get married, prior to the final and permanent declaration of the marriage. Mary and Joseph were committed to marriage, though they had not yet entered that relationship. And we know, specifically, that Mary would enter that marriage as a godly, virtuous young woman.

With such moral excellence and godliness. we also see that,

B. Mary is characterized by submissive faith.

Remember what she is told by the angel Gabriel. “You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son.”

Mary will conceive. She will become pregnant. And that message was troubling for all the obvious reasons I just emphasized. She was a virtuous, unmarried woman who had never known a man. So she thought about the message a lot. It was troubling, for obvious reasons.

v.29

The word “troubled” there doesn't give any rebellious and unbelieving implications as it did with Zecharias, for we read in verse 12 that “he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.” Disbelieving fear, questioning fear, which brought about the gentle chastisement of the Lord is making him unable to speak until John was born.

But with Mary, there is no sense of that disbelief. Simply an initial confusion, an internal debate and evaluation of what she was told. “How could it be?” was the emphasis of her confusion. But without rebellious questioning. And after she received the answer to her obvious question of verse 34, we read of her response in,

v.38

Likewise, as we'll study in Luke 2, when the shepherds came to manger to worship the Christ, telling about the appearances of the angels out in the fields that night, we read that "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." This is a woman who understood the biblical virtues of feminine submission. She understood "the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God."

And she was appropriately honored by God. Indeed,

C. Mary was honored by God's personal blessing.

And it was a blessing! Of the highest order. Notice what the angel spoke to her.

v.28

And the further encouragement,

v.30

Mary had found favor with God, she had found grace. God was being gracious to her. God was blessing her, as he continues to bless women in general, with the great blessing of bearing children. Pregnancy is a blessing. Bearing children is a blessing from God. And how grievous it must be to God when people today speak of such blessings as "mistakes." Or reject that blessing altogether.

Child-bearing is such a fundamental blessing that Paul declares that a women "will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control." Not that childbearing atones for sin, in the technical sense of the word "saved," but that a woman's distinctive female role is one of such blessing that the inspired apostle would use such strong language. Perhaps, to further understand that text, we could exchange the word "blessed" or "honored" for saved. "She will be

[honored, blessed] in childbearing if she continues in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control."

But Mary's blessing exceeded all the more abundantly the blessings given to other women.

v.31-33

Now we move on to the begetting. The blessing of Mary was that the begetting of her son would not be done by a man. Rather,

II. JESUS WAS BEGOTTEN BY THE POWER OF GOD.

The substance of what was announced to her by Gabriel is that she would conceive without the involvement of a man.

v.26-27

This was the announcement, v.31

This pregnancy announcement was given by the angel, a messenger of God. So it is that,

A. Jesus' conception was announced by God.

Announced ahead of time, for it would come about according to God's predetermined plan and purpose. And God explained himself a bit, which is to say, Gabriel emphasized the power of God.

v.35-37

Nothing will be impossible for God! Not even the conception of a woman who was a virgin. Not even the supernatural power necessary to cause a woman's egg to be fertilized within her own womb without the involvement of a man.

Just as it was not too difficult for God to enable Elizabeth to

conceive, with her husband Zecharias, even more, this miracle is not too difficult either! And so I say to you that,

B. Jesus' conception was accomplished by God.

That is to say, God himself performed the male role of begetting, but so clearly not by any biological, sexual method.

Rather,

v.35

The Holy Spirit was the agent of Christ's begetting. And it was accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by any physical act. The power of the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary, and she conceived.

Remember, though, that this announcement was made a long time before Gabriel appeared to Mary. The birth of the Son of God to a virgin was announced long before, in the days of Ahaz, in the days of the great prophet Isaiah,

Is. 7:1 "Now it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to make war against it, but could not prevail against it. 2 And it was told to the house of David, saying, "Syria's forces are deployed in Ephraim." So his heart and the heart of his people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind. 3 Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-Jashub your son, at the end of the aqueduct from the upper pool, on the highway to the Fuller's Field, 4 "and say to him: 'Take heed, and be quiet; do not fear or be fainthearted for these two stubs of smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria, and the son of Remaliah.'"

It was God's promise of victory to Ahaz, king of Judah. A promise given with a sign to verify and validate God's word.

Is. 7:10 "Moreover the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, 11 "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above." 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!"

That great prophecy continues,

Is. 7:13 Then he said, "Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? 14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. 15 "Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 "For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings. 17 "The LORD will bring the king of Assyria upon you and your people and your father's house--days that have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah."

"The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son." Isaiah gives him that great name, which means God with us, "You shall call His name Immanuel."

God living with man. God among men. God inhabiting the world of men. God himself, in the person of the son, born as a man, born of a virgin. God, with us! It is possible only by means of the virgin birth.

This great doctrine is so completely hated and thoroughly denied by the teachings of modern liberalism, for this great doctrine forms the basis for a proper understanding of the divine nature of Jesus Christ. This great doctrine of what we might call the virgin birth is crucial, it is fundamental to our understanding of Christianity.

Because Christianity stands or falls upon the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement, the satisfaction of just justice and wrath by the work of a substitute. But that substitute must be without sin. And every man, descended from Adam, inherits his fallen nature, and is guilty in Adam in original sin. Because of that original sin, because of that fallen nature, every commits his own sin as well.

And just one sin disqualifies any man from being that atoning sacrifice, that propitiation. But “there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.”

He was born of a woman, “being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance,” as our confession defines it. Yet he was also “the second person of the trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father,” as our Confession also explains.

And so, according to our text, this baby who was to be born to Mary, this boy who would be called Jesus, will also be called the Son of God. Fully man. And fully God. Again from the Confession, “So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.”

Let me summarize all this. Without the virgin birth, there is no Mediator between God and man. Without the power of the Holy Spirit to beget Jesus in the womb of his mother Mary, there would be no propitiation, no satisfaction of the wrath of God poured out upon sinners. No forgiveness of sin.

But there is a mediator.

Heb. 7:25 “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. 26 For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.”

And, Heb. 4:14 “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Yet there is more. More spoken to this godly woman named Mary. More prophecy spoken by the angelic spokesman of God. v.32-33

You see,

III. JESUS WAS EXALTED AS THE DIVINE KING.

He will be great! Perhaps Mary would now understand another of Isaiah’s prophecies,

Is. 9:6 “For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end.”

This child, this son would be a great king. And there is a

reason why Mary is chosen to be his mother. Because Mary is a descendant of David. And God had made a promise to David, that his kingdom would never end. His throne, his dynasty, would never end. One of his descendants would always sit upon his throne.

2 Sam. 7:8 “Now therefore, thus shall you say to My servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts: “I took you from the sheepfold, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people, over Israel. 9 “And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and have cut off all your enemies from before you, and have made you a great name, like the name of the great men who are on the earth. 10 “Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore, as previously, 11 “since the time that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel, and have caused you to rest from all your enemies. Also the LORD tells you that He will make you a house. 12 “When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 “He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

When David dies, in other words, his dynasty will continue. His descendant will rule after him as king. The Lord continues,

2 Sam. 7:14 “I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. 15 “But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16 “And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.””

So also was that great prophecy of,

Is. 9:7 “Of the increase of His government and peace There

will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

And so we read in our text, v.32

A. Jesus inherited the throne of David.

And what a great and glorious throne it was! Because, you see, the throne of David was the throne of God. The kingdom of David was the kingdom of God!

That is made so explicitly clear when we read in,

1 Chron. 29:23 “Then Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD as king instead of David his father, and prospered; and all Israel obeyed him.”

It was a theocracy. The earthly throne in Israel and the heavenly throne were one and the same. The earthly kingdom of God’s people and the heavenly kingdom of God’s people were one and the same.

And so when we move into the New Testament, in the new covenant, the great difference we find is that the kingdom is now universal, not limited to the earthly nation of Israel. The kingdom is now made manifest on earth by the church, not by the nation of Israel. Indeed, Paul calls the church the Israel of God. But with that change, there is a great continuity from the Old Covenant to the New. The continuity of David’s throne, David’s kingdom.

That kingdom is now within us, Jesus said. It is not a political kingdom, or, for that matter, a visible kingdom in terms of the nations of this world. It is a spiritual kingdom, but a very real one. With a very real king. Sitting upon a very real throne.

Jesus is that king. The throne is at the right hand of the father who is in heaven. And the kingdom is made visible as the church, which is called the body of Christ. That's the meaning of the language of Ephesians 1, when Paul speaks about the "exceeding greatness of God's power,"

Eph. 1:18 "...according to the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

Therefore, Jesus reigns as king upon the throne of David. Indeed,

B. Jesus will reign as King now and forever.

v.33

And so we have other prophecies such as,

Ps. 2:7 "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel."

And, Ps. 110:1 "The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."

And that is exactly where Jesus sits today! On the throne of David. Ruling over the kingdom of David, as the head of the church of Jesus Christ. And of that kingdom, there shall be no end. Because, you see, Jesus "must reign till He has put all

enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death."

And he shall destroy death! That's the message of 1 Corinthians 15, which I just quoted from.

1 Cor. 15:20 "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. 24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power."

So why is all of that important for us today? Most of all, so that you will worship the King! So that you will honor and worship Jesus as the King. So that you will surrender your lives in loving service to this great and exalted King, who even now sits upon the throne of God.

Our society eagerly celebrates the birth of a little baby. And with all the sentimental and traditional aspects of the Christmas season so greatly magnified all around us, with all the commercialism and materialism so rampant at this time of year when people are buying almost everything, it is easy to miss the whole point. It's not about a little baby. It is not about a pregnant woman, or about animals at a manger scene.

It's about a king. King Jesus.

v.32-33

And so we faithfully proclaim this great message, as we so often sing it, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king." "He rules the world with truth and grace, and

makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love.”

And with the words of Revelation 19 which George Frederick Handel put to music in the Hallelujah Chorus of the Messiah, let us worship our Lord Jesus as King.

Rev. 19:6 “Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!”