

You Shall Call His Name Jesus (Luke 1:26–38)

Cur Deus Homo?

There are two great theological problems the permeate the Old Testament, two tensions that the OT books present but leave unresolved. In other words, I am convinced that a thoughtful and careful reader of the Old Testament will come away convinced that the book is incomplete, an unfinished story, because two great questions remain unanswered.

The first question relates to the mercy and the justice of God. It is presented most clearly in Exodus 34:5–8, when the LORD revealed His glory to Moses and proclaimed His name—that is, His character and nature:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.” And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. (Ex 34:5–8)

The reader of the Old Testament will intuitively feel that this is a significant moment in the OT story, for there on the mountain the LORD granted to Moses a sight of His glory unseen by any human eye since the fall of man, and revealed more of His name and His nature than at any prior point in human history. Indeed, it could be said that the remainder of the Old Testament elaborates upon what is said in Exodus 34:6–7—namely, that the LORD is infinitely merciful and infinitely just. And yet, these two attributes of God appear to be in an intolerable state of tension. “How,” the reader must ask, “can God be ‘a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,’ and yet be a God ‘who will be no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and on the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation?’ How can God be both merciful and just?” To pose the question a different way, a distinctly Pauline way, how can God

be both just and the justifier of the ungodly? The Old Testament leaves this tension ultimately unresolved. We know the answer has something to do with blood, something to do with atonement, but we are left wondering how the blood of bulls and goats could ever take away human sin. It is one of the great, unresolved tensions of the Old Testament, and all the OT reader can do in light of it is to follow Moses' lead and bow his head toward the earth and worship.

The second question relates to the nature of the Messiah as both divine and human. Throughout the Old Testament, the reader is prompted to look for a human redeemer, from the promised seed of the woman in Genesis 3, to the promised prophet like Moses in Deuteronomy 18, to the promised son of David in 2 Samuel 7, to the promised Servant of the LORD in Isaiah 40–66. But the reader of the Old Testament will also find hints here and there that this coming redeemer, prophet, messiah, king, will be more than human—that he will be, in fact, divine. One of the more famous hints comes from Psalm 110:1, where David says of his son,

The LORD says to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand,

until I make your enemies your footstool.” (Ps 110:1; cf. Heb 1:13)

How, the reader might ask (as Jesus, in fact, asked the Pharisees [Mt 22:41–46]), is David's son also David's Lord? Or when the psalmist speaks of the future Davidic king,

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.

The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;

you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you

with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. (Ps 45:6–7; cf. Heb 1:8–9)

But by far the clearest indication of a divine-human Messiah comes from Isaiah 9:6–7. In Isaiah 9, the prophet announces that after a period of darkness and distress, of gloom and anguish in Israel (8:22), a light would dawn in Galilee (9:1–2), ushering in the joy of harvest after a prolonged famine (9:3), the joy of liberation after a long captivity (9:4), the joy of victory over their oppressors (9:5). And what shall occasion this joy? What is this great Galilean light?

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (9:6–7)*

What manner of child is this? It is surely human, for God cannot be born. And yet what human could possibly be called by such divine titles as “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” “Prince of Peace?” What human could reign forever upon the throne of an everlasting kingdom? Yet this tension is left unresolved.

Today’s text in Luke 1:26–38 answers the second question, and in so doing lays the groundwork for answering the first. This morning, we will look to Luke 1 to find out what manner of Messiah this is. Then we will conclude by considering briefly how only a divine-human Messiah could reconcile the mercy and justice of God in the salvation of sinners.

The Union of God and Man in the Messiah’s Incarnation

Luke 1:26–38 provides the clearest NT answer to that second OT question. How can the coming Messiah be both human and divine? How can the infant child born be the Mighty God? How can the son given in time be the Everlasting Father? The astonishing answer is that deity and humanity met in the womb of a young, Galilean, Jewish virgin.

I. The Angelic Visitation (1:26–30)

Let’s begin with the angelic visitation in vv. 26–30:

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!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (1:26–30)

The “sixth month” refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy (cf. 1:36) rather than to the sixth month of the year (Elul, in August–September), and thus does not help us to locate the precise date of Jesus’ birth.¹ That Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee is significant. You will recall that that preeminent Isaianic passage predicting the birth of the Messiah (Is 9:6–7) begins with the dawning of a light in Galilee. Isaiah 8 ends with this description of Israel after having rejected the word of their God:

They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward. And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into deep darkness. (Is 8:21–22)

Such is the fate of those who reject God and His word. But then Isaiah breaks in with this startlingly good news.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. (9:1)

Galilee (the inheritance of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali) lay at the northernmost extremity of the Promised Land. It was the furthest from Jerusalem, the city of God, furthest from the temple, the house of the LORD. It was the first land to be conquered when kings and nations

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel of Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 43; Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1974, 1988), 89.

swept in from the north and the east. In Isaiah's day, Galilee was a land of contempt, a backwater territory, a region of gloom and anguish. And nothing had changed in eight hundred years. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" asked Nathanael (Jn 1:46). "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" inquired the Jerusalem Jews as they pondered whether Jesus could really be the Messiah (Jn 7:41). "Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee," answered the chief priests and the Pharisees in scorn (Jn 7:52). Yet Isaiah prophesied that from Galilee would come the child, the son, the King.

*The people who walked in darkness [generally, Israel (8:22); specifically, Galilee (9:1)]
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has the light shone. (Is 9:2)*

And so it came to pass that God sent His angel to Nazareth, a "city" (πόλιν) of Galilee.²

And he was sent to a virgin (παρθένον), a point to which we shall return. This was also to fulfill Scripture, for Isaiah also prophesied,

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Is 7:14)

It is Matthew who explicitly connects that prophecy to Jesus' birth (Mt 1:22–23); Luke assumes his readers will make the connection. This virgin, whose name was Mary, was betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, a "descendent of David" (ἐξ οἴκου Δαυὶδ). Mary was "betrothed" (ἐμνηστευμένην) to Joseph, a legal status that was far more binding than modern-day engagements. Marriage in the ancient Jewish culture involved two steps. First, the father of the groom (often with the input and consent of the son) would reach an agreement upon a price with the father of the bride (often *without* the consent or input of the daughter), payment would be made to the bride's father, and the son would pledge an oath to marry his daughter. After this, the couple were considered *betrothed*. Legally, the couple were considered husband and wife such

² "We should not think of a bustling metropolis"; Morris, 89. Edwards writes that Nazareth had "a total population of perhaps five hundred people, at the most"; Edwards, 43–44.

that any sexual relationship with another party was considered adultery, and a writ of divorce was required to break the betrothal.³ During the betrothal period, the future groom would prepare his home; when it was ready, he would return for his bride. Then there would be the wedding banquet, after which the marriage was consummated. Joseph and Mary had taken this first step, but not the second. This explains why, when Mary was revealed to be pregnant, Joseph determined to divorce her quietly, rather than put her to open shame (Mt 1:18–19)... that is, until he received his own angelic visit (Mt 1:20–25). Scholars tell us that Mary was likely between thirteen and fifteen years of age, as this was the normal age of betrothal in the first century Jewish culture.⁴ That Joseph was a descendent of David is important to establish Jesus' legal (though not biological) claim to the throne of Israel as the promised Son of David.

Gabriel addresses Mary, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (1:28). If you were raised Catholic, you heard this verse translated out of the Latin Vulgate as “Hail, full of grace” (*have gratia plena*). This is understood by the Catholic Church to mean that Mary is to be regarded as a “source of grace rather than as the *object* of grace.”⁵ This is why they pray, “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 our death.” But this is not what Gabriel says. Mary is not “full of grace,” as though she were the *repository* of grace; Mary is “graced” (κεχαριτωμένη) – i.e., she is the *recipient* of grace.⁶ The participle is passive, meaning that grace is bestowed *upon* Mary, not coming *from* Mary. God has filled her to overflowing with grace. And only sinners need grace, which destroys any notion of Mary’s immaculate conception or sinlessness; she certainly should neither be prayed to, nor worshiped, nor appealed to as a mediator (*mediatrix*) or redeemer (*co-redemptrix*) alongside Christ. To do so is blasphemy. Mary knew she was giving birth to her own Savior, and she rejoiced in that fact, as we will see next week in her *Magnificat*:

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” (1:46–47)*

³ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC 24 (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 82.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume I*, REC (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2009), 31.

⁶ Ryken, 31. The turn of phrase is Ryken’s. Morris writes, “It is, of course, a complete misunderstanding to translate ‘Hail Mary, full of grace,’ and understand the words to mean that Mary would be a source of grace to other people. Gabriel is saying simply that God’s favour rests on her” Morris, 89.

Mary was a faithful Israelite, like Zechariah and Elizabeth a part of the righteous remnant of Israel. But she was a sinner in need of salvation; a slave in need of redemption. She is to be honored as the mother of our Lord and an exemplary sister in the faith; but Mary is in no way qualified to be our mediatrix, as is taught in Catholic dogma, or our co-redemptrix, as has been suggested by some Catholics.

It is unclear why Mary was “greatly troubled” (διεταράχθη) by Gabriel’s greeting, or why she “tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.”⁷ Perhaps this is simply Luke’s way of expressing Mary’s general bewilderment at the whole scene. We know from Zechariah’s experience that an angelic encounter can be a deeply disturbing event (1:12). At any rate, Gabriel assures Mary that he has come with good news and grace. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Literally, “Fear not, Mary, for you have found grace (χάρις) with God.” Again, note that it is not Mary who is the source of grace, but God. God has set His grace upon Mary, and chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah.

II. The Messianic Annunciation (1:31–33)

In vv. 31–33, we see the glorious annunciation (announcement) of the Messiah:

“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.” (1:31–33)

This portion of the angelic announcement focuses upon the office of the Messiah (*what* He will be); the next portion (vv. 35–37) describe the nature of the Messiah (*who* He will be). Gabriel’s annunciation highlights two Messianic offices.

First, the son of Mary will be the Messianic Savior. This is the implication of His given name. It is not left to Mary to name her child; rather, “you shall call his name Jesus.” Why? What

⁷ Morris writes, “We might understand fear at the sight of an angel (as with Zechariah), but her distress is linked with *the saying*”; Morris, 80. Edwards comments, “The Greek word describing her fear (*diatarassein*) occurring only here in the NT, is stronger than the word describing the fear (*tarassein*) that both Zechariah (1:12) and Herod the Great (Matt 2:3) experienced. Ironically, Mary, the quintessential model of faith, is more greatly perplexed by the presence of God than are persons of lesser faith, or of no faith”; Edwards, 45.

is significant about the name of Jesus? In order to grasp the significance, we need to do a little language work. The English name *Jesus* is a transliteration of the Greek *Iesous* (Ἰησοῦς). *Iesous* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua* (יהושע), or in English, *Joshua*. If you look at the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament, you will find *Yehoshua* translated as *Iesous*, or *Jesus*. And *Yehoshua* means “the LORD is salvation.”⁸ This explains why when the angel later appears to Joseph, he explains,

*“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, **for he will save his people from their sins.**” (Mt 1:20–21)*

His name must be Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. And while this connection may not have been apparent to the Greek-speaking Theophilus (or to us), it would have been immediately apparent to the Hebrew-speaking Mary and Joseph. By telling Mary her son’s name shall be called *Jesus* (יהושע), he is telling her that she will give birth to the Messianic Savior. Did faithful Israelites have a conception that the Messiah would be a Savior, to save His people from their sins? Yes, they did.

*But he [the Servant of the LORD/the Messiah] was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned – every one – to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Is 53:5–6)*

Surely this passage was in Simeon’s mind when, holding the infant Jesus in his arms, he looked at Mary and said,

⁸ Morris, 89.

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” (Lk 2:34–35)

What did Simeon mean that a sword would pierce Mary’s soul *also*, if not that this Child would one day be pierced—pierced for our transgressions? The faithful of Israel looked for a Savior—specifically, a suffering Savior—the antitype of all those sacrifices of bulls and lambs that can never take away sin (Heb 10:4). And now Gabriel tells Mary that the son to be born from her womb would be that Messianic Savior, Jesus, who will save His people from their sins.⁹

Second, the son of Mary will be the Messianic King. This is primary focus of Gabriel’s annunciation. Gabriel seems to be quoting Isaiah 9:6–7 when he speaks of the Lord God giving to Jesus “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.” While I am convinced that only the truly faithful in Israel, the righteous remnant, looked for a Messianic Savior to save them from their sins, it seems that many looked for a Messianic King to reign upon David’s throne and restore the kingdom to Israel (cf. Jn 6:15; Acts 1:6). This expectation was rooted in God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:

*“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”
(2 Sm 7:12–13)*

The concept of the Messianic Son of David ruling forever upon Israel’s throne pervades the Psalms and the Prophets.

*You have said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to David my servant:*

⁹ It should also be noted that the phrase “conceive and bear a son” is identical to that of Isaiah 7:14—“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” The son promised in Isaiah 7:14 was a sign of the LORD’s salvation of Judah from the Syro-Ephraimite alliance. Thus, the phraseology of Gabriel’s annunciation also speaks to office of Savior.

*I will establish your offspring forever,
and build your throne for all generations.”
(Ps 89:4; cf. 89:29; 110:1–2, 5–6; 139:12)*

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called, “The LORD is our righteousness.” (Jer 23:5–6)

And, of course, we have already mentioned Isaiah 9:7 (cf. 11:1–10). And now Gabriel informs Mary that the child to be born from her womb will be that Son of David, the Messianic King for which Israel had long hoped, who would both possess the nations as an inheritance and shatter them with a rod of iron (Ps 2:8–9).

III. The Divine Incarnation (1:34–37)

Mary immediately thinks of one major hurdle to the fulfillment of the angel’s words:

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:34)

I mentioned last week the symmetry between Luke’s account of the angelic annunciation of John’s birth and the angelic annunciation of Jesus’ birth. That said, there are two significant contrasts. The first is between the miraculous—though still natural—birth of John, and the miraculous, supernatural birth of Jesus. The messenger was born of a miracle; Elizabeth was barren, and both she and Zechariah were “advanced in age” (1:18). Yet, despite the biological impossibilities, John was conceived through the natural means of marital relations. The Messiah, on the other hand, is greater than the messenger (Lk 3:16; Jn 1:26–30), and so must His birth be greater than the messenger’s birth. John was born through natural conception; Jesus through supernatural conception.¹⁰

¹⁰ Stein, 84.

The second contrast is between Zechariah's response, and Mary's response. Zechariah's was a response of unbelief: "How shall I know this?" (κατὰ τί γνώσομαι τοῦτο). Zechariah was asking for a sign, some validation of the truthfulness of the angel's message. Mary, on the other hand, responds in faith: "How will this be?" (πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο). Hers is not a question of *whether* the angel's word will come true, but *how*, since she was a virgin (lit. "since I do not know a man"—ἐπεὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω).¹¹ Gabriel's response to Mary's question provides us with the clearest statement of the incarnation in all of Scripture.

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 will be called holy—the Son of God." (1:35)

I'm not saying that this *explains* how the incarnation will take place, only that it *declares* that the incarnation will take place. The precise nature of the incarnation remains a mystery, beyond our comprehension. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit "will come upon" (ἐπελεύσεται) Mary, and that the power of the Most High "will overshadow" (ἐπισκιάσει) her? I am quite sure there is nothing sexual about it, like in the pagan Greek myths.¹² Rather, I think the imagery is that of creation. Just as in Genesis 1:2, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" when God said, "Let there be light," and there was light, so in Jesus' conception, the Spirit of God hovered over Mary's virginal womb, and God said, "Let there be life," and there was life. While the precise nature of this virginal conception is a mystery, the effect is clear. "Therefore (διὸ καὶ) the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God." Legally, through Joseph's lineage, Jesus was the Son of David and heir to the throne of Israel; incarnationally, Jesus was the Son of God, and heir to the throne of heaven.

What did the virgin conception of Jesus accomplish?¹³ Is it an essential doctrine of the Christian faith? Yes, it is. And by "essential," I mean that one cannot be saved who denies it.

¹¹ Stein writes, "Mary's question should not be understood as reflecting the same kind of doubt Zechariah possessed (Luke 1:18), since there is present no rebuke as in 1:19–23"; Stein, 85. Morris writes, "Where Zechariah had been disbelieving, Mary was puzzled"; Morris, 90.

¹² "This delicate expression rules out crude ideas of a 'mating' of the Holy Spirit with Mary"; Morris, 90.

¹³ I distinguish between the virgin "birth" and the virgin "conception." Jesus' birth was not virginal in the sense that Mary delivered Him in the natural human fashion. The virgin birth is a Roman Catholic doctrine related to their doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity—that Mary remained a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ (ante partum, in partu, et post partum).

Why? Because our redemption could not be accomplished without it. Following Wayne Grudem, I think the virgin conception of Jesus is vital to at least three aspects of our redemption.¹⁴

First, the virgin conception of Jesus is essential because pure water cannot come from a poisoned well; a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. And humanity is a poisoned well, a diseased tree. If humanity is to be redeemed, redemption must come from outside of humanity. It must come from God.¹⁵ The virgin conception of Jesus demonstrates this. The Messiah was born, “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn 1:13). The divine gift of salvation could not have come through human biology, or human works, or human will. It must come from God. In this way, the virgin conception of Jesus mirrors our own rebirth by the Spirit. When we are dead in our trespasses and sins, the Spirit comes upon us, and the power of the Most High overshadows us, and life is conceived within our souls, issuing in faith and repentance.

Second, the virgin conception of Jesus is essential to our redemption because by means of this Jesus was born without the natural corruption and legal guilt that the rest of mankind inherits from Adam. “... therefore the child to be born will be called *holy*.” All of mankind inherits from Adam a corrupt nature that is irreparably bent towards sin, and it inherits the guilt of Adam’s sin, thus placing us in a state of condemnation under God’s wrath (Rom 3:10–12; 5:18–19; Eph 2:1–3; et al.). We are not born innocent; we do not enter the world morally neutral. We enter the world guilty and corrupt. We do not become sinners when we sin; we sin because we are sinners. But not Jesus. The author of Hebrew writes of Jesus,

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Heb 4:15)

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. (Heb 7:26–27)

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020; orig. 1994), 663–66. I reverse Grudem’s second and third reasons.

¹⁵ “The virgin birth of Christ is an unmistakable reminder that salvation can never come through human effort, but must be the work of God himself”; *ibid.*, 530.

And the apostle John writes,

*You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.
(1 Jn 3:5; 1 Pt 2:22)*

The connection between Jesus' virgin conception and his sinlessness is made in today's passage:

*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 will be called holy—the Son of God.**" (1:35)*

The child shall be called holy *because* of His virgin conception by the Holy Spirit. But how? What is the connection between the virgin conception of Jesus and the sinlessness of Jesus? Most evangelicals would respond, "Because Jesus did not have a human father," which implies that sin is transmitted biologically through the father. But that answer raises its own problems. Why did not Jesus inherit a corrupt nature from Mary?¹⁶ This is a complex discussion, but I think the simplest solution is that our inheritance from Adam (sin and guilt, corruption and condemnation) is not transmitted biologically, but covenantally. In other words, the primary nature of humanity's union in Adam is not biological but covenantal; we do not inherit sin and guilt, corruption and condemnation through biological generation (natural descent), but through covenantal imputation (supernatural decree). My primary reason for arguing this is that our relation to Jesus (the second Adam) is not biological (natural descent), but covenantal (supernatural decree); it is through our covenantal relation to Jesus—not any biological relation—that we inherit His righteousness and life. It makes sense to me, then, that our relation to the first Adam exists upon the same grounds. So when asked how the virgin conception secures Christ's sinlessness, I do not think the answer

¹⁶ In answer to the question, Why did Jesus not inherit a sinful nature from Mary? Grudem rejects the Catholic doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception, and instead writes, "A better solution is to say that the work of the Holy Spirit in Mary must have prevented not only the transmission of sin from Joseph (for Jesus had no human father) but also, in a miraculous way, the transmission of sin from Mary"; Grudem, 531. Similarly, Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley write, "The Holy Scriptures do not explain how Christ's supernatural conception relates to his infant holiness—and we do best to avoid speculation—but we can say that Christ's humanity 'partook of the essential character of all that God creates: it was very good' (cf. Gen. 1:31). The incarnate Son of God is all that Adam was meant to be, and far more (Luke 3:22, 38)"; Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Man and Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 2.814. Beeke and Smalley are quoting from Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 40–41.

is, “Because Jesus did not have a human father.” I think the answer is, “Because God created Jesus’ human nature in Mary’s womb as He created Adam in the Garden—that is, by divine decree through the working of divine power.”¹⁷ Even if we cannot fully explain it, Gabriel’s words make it clear that there is a connection between Jesus’ virginal conception and His sinlessness. It is because the child will be conceived of the Holy Spirit that he will be called holy—the Son of God. And unless Jesus is holy—sinless, undefiled, separate from sinners—He cannot offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

Finally, the virgin conception of Jesus made possible the incarnation of the Son of God. “... therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the *Son of God*” (διὸ καὶ τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον κληθήσεται υἱὸς θεοῦ). Through the virgin conception, the eternal Son of God became man (Jn 1:14). To be more precise, the eternal Son of God added to His divine nature a fully human nature, taking upon Himself a fully human body and a fully human soul with a fully human will, yet without any diminishing of His divine attributes, with the result that Jesus was and continues to be both God and man in two distinct and complete natures, united together “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of the natures being in no way annulled by their union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence;” two distinct natures united forever in one person, the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁸ The precise nature of this *hypostatic union* of Christ’s divine and human natures is beyond our comprehension; we have nothing with which

¹⁷ My answer, then, is similar to that of John Frame: “It is sometimes said that the virgin birth preserves Jesus from the contamination of the sin of Adam. But although Adam’s sin comes upon everyone born of natural generation, it is not proved that inherited sin comes *by means of* natural generation. To say that it does presupposes a traducianist view of the origin of the soul. If the soul (i.e., the human life) is entirely an inheritance from the person’s parents, then sin is an inheritance from them as well. But if, as on the creationist view, each human life is a special creation of God, then sin is by a divine imputation to each individual. On a creationist view, then, Jesus can be genuinely the son of Mary, without God’s imputing to him the sin of Adam. On a traducianist view, there evidently had to be a supernatural action of God to exempt Jesus from inherited sin. But that accords with the supernatural character of the whole event. On either a creationist or traducianist account, however, it is God’s decision, not the absence of a human father, that exempted Jesus from inherited sin. Scripture tells us specifically that it was the Spirit’s involvement that made the child to be holy (Luke 1:35). So the doctrine of the virgin birth should not be used to suggest that sin is transmitted through the male lineage rather than one’s female ancestry. The virgin birth, therefore, is relevant to original sin in that it shows in Jesus both a continuity and a discontinuity with Adam and his descendants. But the mysteriousness of the event should discourage easy deductions from either his divine or his human nature”; John M Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2013), 887.

¹⁸ The Chalcedonian Definition (AD 451). Beeke and Smalley make the important point that Jesus was truly conceived: “Jesus was not implanted in Mary’s womb, but was formed of her flesh by the Spirit”; Beeke and Smalley, 791. “In scholastic terminology, the Holy Spirit was the efficient cause of Christ’s conception, and Mary’s body was the material cause”; Ibid., 791n45.

to compare it, that we might point to that and say, “It’s like this.” But there is ample biblical evidence to affirm its truth. And apart from the incarnation and the union of the two natures in the one person of Christ, there would be no redemption, for there would be no mediator between God and man (1 Tm 2:5). The Messiah had to be fully man, for only a truly human Messiah could serve as a fit substitute for humanity. Likewise, the Messiah had to be fully divine, for only a truly divine Messiah could possess sufficient worth and glory to satisfy divine wrath and put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Heb 9:26). In the midst of Job’s terrible sufferings, when he felt like an ant under the boot of an impassible God, he lamented that there was no mediator between God and man, who might lay his hand upon us both (Job 9:33). But now, because of the virgin conception, because of the incarnation of the Son of God, there is. Jesus Christ has laid His hand upon both deity and humanity, and has reconciled sinful man to a holy God.

Gabriel then informs Mary of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy:

“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.” (1:36–37)

“Nothing shall be impossible” (οὐκ ἄδυνατήσῃ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πᾶν ῥῆμα) with God. To deny the virgin conception of Jesus is to deny the omnipotence of God. And to deny God’s omnipotence is to deny God’s existence.

IV. The Faithful Submission (1:38)

Verse 38 records Mary’s response to Gabriel’s message. Unlike Zechariah, Mary is not at all dissuaded by the biological impossibility; her God is too big for that. Rather, she responds in faithful, humble submission.

And 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. (1:38)

I think we would do well to pause and marvel at Mary’s response and what it reveals about the nature of saving faith. Because her faith must be our faith, if we are to be saved as she was.

First, it is faith in the word of God. All Mary had was a message, which is all you have as well. Granted, her message came from the mouth of an angel; your message comes from somewhat less angelic lips. But both messages have the same source—it is the word of God. All saving faith is rooted in the word of God, for “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17). Faith comes by hearing, not by sight. That was Zechariah’s problem; he wanted a sign, something to see (besides the appearance of an angel, apparently). But Mary believed the word alone. I would argue that my message comes with far more credibility than Gabriel’s did, not because I am more credible than Gabriel, but because I bring you the words of Holy Scripture. Not every angel, not every spirit, is to be believed (Gal 1:8; 1 Jn 4:1). But I bring you “the prophetic word more fully confirmed” (2 Pt 1:19), the testimony of Scripture, inspired by the Spirit, sealed by the blood of the apostles and prophets, and received by the church as Holy Writ for two thousand years. And I call upon you today to believe it.

Second, it is faith in a Messiah who is both Savior and King. These were the two messianic offices Gabriel announced that Mary’s Son would fulfill. His name is Jesus, “the LORD is salvation,” because He saves His people from their sins (Mt 1:21). And He is the Son of David whom God has appointed to rule forever in righteousness and peace upon the throne of God’s kingdom. Jesus is the Messianic Savior and the Messianic King. You cannot receive Him as one without receiving Him as the other. You cannot receive from him the forgiveness of sins unless you also submit to His reign. So I call upon you today to submit in faith to Christ as both Savior and King, who has come to save you from your sins through His life, death, and resurrection, and to reign over you in righteousness by the authority of His word.

Third, it is faith in a Messiah who is both God and man. There was no mistaking Gabriel’s words. Mary was going to conceive a son by the Holy Spirit, and give birth to the Son of God. That is a lot for a fourteen-year-old Hebrew girl to take in. Yet she believed it. Perhaps she knew from passages like Isaiah 9:6–7 that the long-awaited Messiah would be both God and man. Perhaps she knew that the Messiah could not accomplish the redemption of His people without being both God and man. This is the Lord Jesus Christ, and saving faith embraces Him as such—two complete and distinct natures, truly divine and truly human, united forever in one person. And I call you today to set your hope on Him.

Fourth, it is faith that is willing to suffer for the sake of Christ. Leon Morris reminds us of the immense danger Mary faced as a result of this word from God:

We are apt to take this as the most natural thing and accordingly we miss Mary's quiet heroism. She was not yet married to Joseph. His reaction to her pregnancy might have been expected to be a strong one and Matthew tells us that he did in fact think of divorcing her (Mt. 1:19). Again, while the death penalty for adultery (Dt. 22:23f.) does not seem to have been carried out often, it was still there. Mary could not be sure that she would not have to suffer, perhaps even die. But she recognized the will of God and accepted it.¹⁹

Even though she wasn't stoned for her supposed adultery (as some still did; cf. Jn 7:53–8:11), Mary surely suffered a kind of social death. She undoubtedly lived out her days in Galilee under a cloud of suspicion (cf. Jn 8:41). Yet she was willing to accept it for the sake of Christ. And since "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tm 3:12), all saving faith accepts the inevitability of suffering, yet believes anyway. So I am calling you to risk all for the sake of Christ. You will certainly suffer; you might die... nearly all of His disciples did. But you will inherit everlasting life in His name. So today, bow your heart before this Jesus who is both Savior and King, both God and man, and say with Mary, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

The Union of Mercy and Justice in the Messiah's Crucifixion

The incarnation of Jesus Christ resolved the second great tension of the Old Testament, and laid the groundwork for the resolution of the first. How can the Messiah be both God and man? Luke 1 reveals that the eternal Son of God became incarnate in the womb of the virgin, with the result that the Messiah is true God and true man in one Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is only because Jesus is true God and true man that he can resolve the first great tension of the Old Testament—namely, how can God be both merciful and just toward sinners? The answer is in the cross of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. Because God and Man were united in the Messiah's incarnation, mercy and justice were united in the Messiah's crucifixion.

The justice of God requires satisfaction, for "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23); "the soul who sins shall die" (Ezk 18:4). The absolute commitment of God to His own glory means that He will not leave the guilty unpunished (Ex 34:7). God will be found just in the punishment of sinners. But the mercy of God desires forgiveness; God is not willing that any should perish,

¹⁹ Morris, 82.

but that all should come to repentance (2 Pt 3:9). But how can God do both? How can He punish sinners, and yet forgive sinners? The answer, introduced in the Old Testament, is through a substitute sacrifice. The Old Testament revealed that “without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin” (Heb 9:22; Lv 17:11). Yet the Old Testament also revealed that the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin (Heb 10:4). Bulls and goats and lambs are not fit substitutes for men made in the image of God. So the Old Testament promised a Messiah who would bear our sins, receiving in Himself the just penalty of our sin (Is 53:5–6). But it was not clear how these two great prophecies—Isaiah 9 and Isaiah 53—would come together.

- Only one who is true man could be a fit substitute for man. Thus, we needed a human Messiah.
- Only one who is a sinless man could be a fit sacrifice for a sinful man. Thus, we needed a sinless Messiah.
- But only one who is true God could possess the infinite worth required to satisfy the infinite debt of man’s sin. Thus, we needed a divine Messiah.
- But the wages of sin is death, and only man can die.
- Yet only God has power over death, power to give life.

When Anselm of Canterbury (1033/34–1109) wrote his famous *Cur Deus Homo*, this was the answer he gave: God became man, deity and humanity united in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, in order that mercy and justice might unite in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

- Being true man, Jesus is a fit substitute for men.
- Being a sinless man, Jesus is a fit sacrifice for sinful men.
- Being true God, Jesus possesses the infinite worth required to satisfy man’s infinite debt.
- Being man, Jesus could die.
- Being God, Jesus could triumph over death and rise to everlasting life (Rom 1:4).

It is because in the incarnation Jesus became the God-Man that in the crucifixion God showed Himself just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26). God showed Himself just by pouring His righteous wrath against sinners upon Christ our Substitute. And having satisfied His righteous wrath in the death of Christ, God justifies sinners freely by His grace through faith in Christ. Mercy and justice met in the One in whom deity and humanity met. This is high and holy doctrine; this is the center of the Christian faith; this is the gospel.