

Extraordinary Announcement

Luke 1:26-38

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²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed 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!" 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?"

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 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 of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. – Luke 1:26-38, ESV

The Reality of our Redemption

If familiarity breeds contempt, then sometimes some distance can bring perspective. We have always enjoyed living in Harford County, but when we moved away for almost four and a half years, living in South Carolina and Georgia, we returned with a new appreciation for how special Harford County is. From the libraries to the parks, the shops and restaurants to the people, we love living in Harford County, having gained a new perspective from some time away.

The Christmas story is so familiar to most Christians that it can feel overly familiar, and we can easily begin to overlook the wonderful, surprising, and unexpected truth of it all. It helps to remind ourselves from time-to-time that this is not just a story in a book, but this is reality. Mary was a real teenage girl living in a very small town in rural Galilee. She was really engaged to be married in a very conservative religious community to a devout man of godly character when she became pregnant.

This Mary of Nazareth is not a painting or a statue. She's a girl – in many ways a girl of exemplary and extraordinary faith and character, but still a girl. She was likely between 13 and 15 years old. She had no sense of expectation of anything extraordinary in her life. She was looking forward to her wedding celebration and her marriage, to having children and a family, like other girls her age in Israel and like millions and millions of young women around the world throughout history.

Then the angel Gabriel showed up and brought her greetings and a message from God that changed everything. This message would change the whole world, but first, in a real and profound way, it changed Mary's life forever.

A. Gabriel's Greeting (vv. 26-29)

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.

It was the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy in a banner year for the angel Gabriel. Six months before, he had visited the Temple in Jerusalem where Zechariah the priest was on duty and he had brought him news that his wife, long called "barren" and unable to get pregnant, was going to have a baby who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. Now, six months after the forerunner's miraculous conception, Gabriel had been sent to a very different place to a very different kind of person.

Luke draws so many parallels between Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah and his announcement here to Mary that he's inviting us to make comparisons and draw contrasts between the two. Zechariah is an older man, a priest, ministering in the Temple. Mary is a young virgin girl, inexperienced and living in a small town. She is betrothed, a word indicating something more than our "engaged" today.

Marriages in Jesus' day took place in two stages: The betrothal was a solemn contract which included the payment of the bride price and made a man and woman husband and wife. However, the marriage would not be consummated in the wedding celebration for about a year or so. Mary and Joseph were legally husband and wife at this point, and so any child born to Mary would be considered Joseph's, unless he declared that it was not his child and got a divorce.

This is important because Joseph is of the house of David. He is in the royal line of Israel, though no one had sat on the throne for nearly 600 years. Legally, Mary's baby boy would be Joseph's child. Thus, Gabriel's announcement is coming in fulfillment of the covenant promise God made to David a thousand years earlier, in 2 Samuel 7:12-13, 16 –

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 . . . And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. (ESV)

Now, Mary herself may also have been a direct descendant of King David, but we don't know that for sure. One theory interprets the genealogy of Jesus as recorded in Luke 3 to be Mary's genealogy, but that's not 100% clear from the text and may not be the best way to understand that genealogy.

²⁸ *And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"* ²⁹ *But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.*

Gabriel's greeting of Mary comes with a triple-dose of grace, which is hard to see in our English translation. The Greek word for grace is "charis" and means favor or kindness, especially undeserved favor or kindness, and both "Greetings" and "favored one" are words with the root "charis" (grace). It's like Gabriel is saying, "Grace to you, O special recipient of grace!" So this double-grace opening is then followed with, "The Lord is with you," which is yet another expression of God's special gracious favor being with Mary.

The overwhelming graciousness of Gabriel's greeting leaves Mary puzzled, actually "greatly troubled" or "agitated" or even "distressed" by this unusual greeting. Mary can't imagine why she would be addressed in this way!

Gabriel's greeting to Mary reminds me of the angel of the Lord's greeting of Gideon in Judges 6. Gideon was from the weakest clan in Manasseh and he was the least in his father's house. When the angel came to Gideon, he was threshing wheat in secret, using a winepress to hide his activity from the Midianites, who had overrun the land in huge numbers. Yet the angel of the Lord comes to Gideon and says, "*The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.*" (Judges 6:12, ESV)

The greeting of Gideon is an example of how God sees things we don't see, for He knows in advance exactly what He is going to do, and so He is able to see what will be as clearly as what is. But Mary is just an ordinary girl. She is humble and cannot imagine that she could be the object of such overwhelming divine favor.

B. The Message for Mary (vv. 30-33)

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."

Gabriel eases Mary's anxiety by reassuring her that she has indeed found favor with God. No one who has found favor with God ever needs to be afraid. He then goes on to explain to her what God is going to do in her and for her in His gracious favor toward her: She is going to conceive in a miraculous way and bear a son. This son will be unlike anyone else who has ever lived in many ways:

1. **His name: Jesus**, or Joshua, was not an unusual name, but the significance of this baby having this name was certainly unique. Joshua means "Yahweh saves" and Jesus would be salvation. Matthew 1 tells us that the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream to explain to him the divine origin of his betrothed beloved's pregnancy. In that dream, the angel explained to Joseph: "*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*"
2. **His nature: He will be great.** This kind of absolute statement is very rare in the Bible. Zechariah was told that John the Baptist would be "great before the Lord." But Mary is told simply, "He will be great," a description of absolute greatness which is usually reserved in Scripture for God alone.
3. **His title: He will be called Son of the Most High.** Here Gabriel is telling Mary what title Jesus will have, as the Son of God. Referring to God as "*the Most High*" is echoing one of David's favorite ways of referring to God in the Psalms, which is a preparation for the fourth unique thing Mary is told about her Son:
4. **His position: "And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David."** Jesus will be the Son of God and the Son of David, the long-awaited Messiah, who would reign over God's people

on David's throne. Yet unlike any other Son of David, this long-awaited king would reign forever, which is the fifth and final thing Gabriel tells Mary about her Son:

5. **His reign: “he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”** All other kings of the earth have come and gone. They have reigned and then died and left their thrones to others. Not this King. He would reign forever.

Imagine being told these five unbelievable things about one of your children before they had even been conceived: A Savior. One who is absolutely great. The Son of God. The ruler over God's people. A King who will reign forever. It's all so wonderful as to be absolutely impossible.

Mary is left stunned and unable to comprehend Gabriel's words.

C. Confusion & Clarity (vv. 34-35)

Mary asks an obvious question, seeking clarity - *And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”*

Many people have mocked the idea of the virgin birth, saying that people back in Bible times were unscientific and didn't understand as much as we do, and that's why they'd be willing to believe in something like the virgin birth. Now that's just insulting! Mary may have been a relatively uneducated girl from a small village, but even she knew how babies came into the world. That's why she asked, *“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”*

So Gabriel responds to her very natural question with some clarification: *“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.”*

While some people have mocked the idea of the virgin birth, others have wondered whether the doctrine was really that important. If the idea of a virgin birth confuses people and makes them question or doubt Christianity, why not just downplay it? Is it really that big of a deal? Well, yes it is.

First of all, people who cannot accept the idea of a virgin conceiving a child will not be able to accept any of the miracles of the Bible. If it's impossible for God to create life in the womb of a virgin, then it's impossible for a man to feed over 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. It's equally impossible for a man to walk on water, raise the dead or rise from the dead Himself. Laying aside one miracle because people find it hard to believe could send us down a road of setting aside all miracles. Yet if we can accept the very first words of the Bible, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” then miracles become very possible. A God who can create all of reality can certainly intervene in that created reality whenever He chooses.

So, why is the virgin birth important? It's important because Jesus is the Son of God and the son of Mary. He is both divine and human, true God and true man. The virgin birth establishes the unique nature of Jesus as distinct from the conception and birth of every other person who has ever lived.

Some people have understood well the importance of the virgin birth, even if they don't believe. Legendary talk-show host Larry King was asked who he would like to interview from all of human history, if he could pick just one person. Mr. King's answer was that he would like to interview Jesus Christ. When the questioner

followed with, “And what would you like to ask him?” King replied, “I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me.”

The virgin birth of Jesus does indeed define all of human history. Throughout history, billions and billions of people have been born, have lived and have died. Only one man was ever born of a virgin and only one man was ever raised from the dead with the power of an indestructible life, never to die again. Only one man now lives forever in the same body He has had for 2,000 years, the body God formed in the womb of the virgin Mary, now glorified and seated at the right hand of God the Father.

To confirm the remarkable explanation he has just given Mary, Gabriel says, “*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.*”

Mary knew her older cousin Elizabeth well, and she knew that she was unable to have children. Elizabeth had an established reputation as a barren woman. Now she was six months pregnant!

“Nothing will be impossible with God.” Here is another truth for believers to keep always in our minds. If we as believers could live our lives each day with these two truths clearly in our minds and hearts:

1. “*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*”
2. “*Nothing will be impossible with God.*”

D. A Sign and Sweet Submission (vv. 36-38)

Mary’s response to the words of Gabriel are, in many ways, as remarkable as Gabriel’s words to her - *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.*

Just think of how radically Mary’s life would be forever changed by the news Gabriel brought her. She would have to tell Joseph about her pregnancy, and would he believe her? Certainly no one else would. Setting aside the social rejection and the rumors and gossip, imagine the weight of responsibility of being the mother of the Son of God. Imagine knowing that your peasant son, being raised by a simple family with little money and no political power, was supposed to sit on David’s throne forever!

All of these thoughts and emotions must have been swirling around Mary’s head, but she doesn’t say, “I can’t do this. It’s impossible,” or “You picked the wrong girl. Please pick someone else.” When God called Moses to go to Pharaoh in Egypt and tell him to let God’s people go, Moses objected and tried to get out of the calling. Yet Mary responds with humility and complete submission to God’s will.

Mary: A Model for Mere Mortals

The more human we realize Mary was, the more her response of humility and submission is an effective model for us. If we make Mary out to be some superhuman person – a sinless woman who was herself divinely conceived and who remained a perpetual virgin and then was assumed up to heaven – the more we remove her from the very real struggles of us mere mortals.

But Mary was a mere mortal, like the rest of us. She was a sinner who needed salvation. She was a believer who struggled with real-life questions and who needed reassurance. Later, when Jesus was fully grown and engaged in His public ministry, she would doubt Him and even go with her other sons to try to get Him to come home. She would weep at the foot of His cross, thinking it was all over, just like all of His other followers.

Yet Mary the teenage girl received the grace of God and was used by God in powerful ways to accomplish His purposes. She is a model to us. We don't need to be rich, powerful, uniquely gifted or sinless in order to be used by God to do great things. We need to believe and to humbly submit ourselves to His will, trusting that if we have received His favor, we have no reason to fear, for nothing is impossible for Him.