

*The Angelic Announcement of the Birth of Jesus (Lk. 1.26-38)*

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<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" <sup>29</sup> But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> 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.

### Introduction

Biblical teaching on angels is sparse to say the least, but from Scripture, we know that they serve God in His presence and that they serve God's people. One way that they serve is by being instruments of divine revelation at various points in redemptive history. So, when the fullness of time came for the realization of the promises of the OT, angels were present. In fact, the angel by the name of Gabriel proclaimed the coming of the kingdom by announcing the birth of the forerunner of the promised Messiah. We considered that announcement last time in our exposition of Luke (1.5-25). Centrally, he said of John that he will **make ready for the Lord a people prepared** (Lk. 1.17). Then Gabriel went to Mary to announce the coming birth of Jesus, the Lord for whom John will prepare a people. Thus, fulfillment of OT prophecy begins with prophetic proclamations by the angel Gabriel. Luke takes us back to this beginning and follows it very closely. The result is that we have God's interpretation of these events. Accordingly, the announcement of the birth of Jesus reveals two things about the coming Lord: He will be great and He will be holy. The former comes unilaterally from Gabriel to Mary and the latter comes by dialogue with Gabriel. Thus, in this birth announcement, we have Gabriel's message to Mary and Mary's dialogue with Gabriel.

### 1A. Gabriel's message to Mary

Let's begin with the angel's message that reveals the greatness of Jesus. It is extremely important to note that this text is not about Mary; it is not about the greatness of Mary. As we read the account again, note the fact that Gabriel's message to Mary reveals the greatness of Jesus, the son of Mary and not her greatness; it is about the son not the mother!

We have three things here pertaining to the message of the angel: its background (or the setting), the address to Mary, and we have the core of the message regarding the Lord who is coming.

#### 1) Background for the message

We have the background in verses 26-27. **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.** Before any action takes place on stage, the narrator sets the stage by giving the time, the messenger, the place, and the recipient of the angelic announcement.

How does mention of the time help us? Reference to **the sixth month** connects this event with the previous action of Gabriel when he announced the conception and birth of John the Baptist. Elizabeth is now six months into her pregnancy in fulfillment of the word of God

delivered by the angel. Noting the time also looks ahead to Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth who is not only pregnant, but who has a very active child *kicking* in the womb, or shall we say, *jumping around in there* (1.41-44). The timing helps us understand the event in the stream of events.

The messenger is the same angel, Gabriel that appeared to the father of John. That God sent him tells us that more revelation from God is coming because more is about to happen in the unfolding of God's plan of redemption. We have the intertwining of event and revelation, redemptive deed and redemptive word. In a way that may surprise some people and perplex others, the redemption of the world begins in obscurity because, as one author put it, the place where these events occur is Nazareth of Galilee, "a nothing town in the middle of "nowhere" (Hughes, *Luke*, 1.30).

Interestingly, the angel does not go to the prospective father as he did in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The recipient of this birth announcement is a woman, an unmarried woman, and a virgin for Luke says the angel was sent **to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David** (27a). The idea of a prospective father is immediately suppressed. In its place, and thrown into bold relief, is a remarkable emphasis on a **virgin** as the recipient of this angelic message. She is betrothed, which means, as the translations have it, to be engaged, espoused, or pledged to be married. She is unmarried but in a commitment to be married. The man to whom she is pledged is **Joseph, of the house of David**. Thus, the angel is sent to a virgin that is espoused, that is, committed to becoming a spouse. In this case, the angel does not go, as one might expect, to the husband to be, no doubt because he is not a prospective father with respect to this birth announcement. So, before the woman is named, *the fact that she is a virgin is underscored again: And the virgin's name was Mary* (27b; even *who she is* has a subordinate place).

The background for this angelic birth announcement is the time (the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy), the place (in the obscure town of Nazareth near the Sea of Galilee), and the recipient is not a prospective father but a virgin, specifically, the virgin's name was Mary.

## 2) The address to Mary comes next

One striking fact about this address to Mary is how it reveals her ungreatness! Saying this upfront, of course, runs against a great deal of church tradition, but consider the text to see if this is true: <sup>28</sup> **And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"** <sup>29</sup> **But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.** <sup>30</sup> **And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.** (28-30).

Mary's response is quite understandable; does she know that this is an angel? The greeting announces her favored standing with God: **the Lord is with you**; God is with you in some special way. Thus, she was troubled (greatly troubled, feared, terrified) and immediately set out to discern **what sort of greeting this might be**. That is, she wondered about its meaning. She intuitively began to search for the implications of this greeting for her life as a maiden in Israel. At that point, the angel comforted her with the phrase that we will hear again from the lips of our Lord, **Do not be afraid**. Gabriel is very personal and comforting in the way he addresses her by name: do not be afraid, *Mary*. He also gives her comfort by repeating her favored standing with God as a restraint on fear: **for you have found favor with God** (1.30).

Literally, the translation of this clause could be: for you have found grace with God. Accordingly, as Ryken (*Reformed Expositor's Commentary* on Luke, I, pp. 30-31) points out, the angel does not tell Mary that she is full of grace as if she is some kind of source of grace. That is a mistranslation for the text informs us that Mary is a recipient of grace and not a repository of grace. Clearly, Gabriel is not worshipping Mary, nor does he give us a basis upon which to

elevate her in our worship as is done in the regularly used prayer: “Hail Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee. Blessed are 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.” There are some very misleading words in this prayer that Scripture nowhere commands us to pray. I do not refer to the phrases: “Mother of God” or “Blessed are thou among women” (as in Lk. 1.42-43). God, the second person of the trinity, received human nature from Mary His mother, so, she is the mother of God in the sense that from her flesh, Jesus, God the Son, became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1.1-14). Likewise, it is true that Mary is specially blessed among women because she was the woman through whom the descendent of Eve and of Sarah (Gen. 3.15; 17.16) would come. That descendent is the Savior of the world, the coming one who will bring restoration from all the effects of fall. Thus, in Israel, the idea of marriage and having children had deeper meaning than the mere custom of maintaining the family name. The depth extends to the command at the beginning of the human race to fill the earth and goes even deeper to the promise of restoration through the messianic descendent. Only one woman in all of history would have the honor of giving birth to the Savior of the world. That woman is now identified; it is Mary. She is “blessed among women.”

However, the most important fact that we should not overlook or play down is the fact that the favored status of Mary indicates that her position is undeserved because grace is unmerited favor. God chose Mary from among the fallen women of human history; she was a sinner to whom God gave electing grace. He chose her and blessed her by His grace. In other words, this marvelous role that Mary fulfilled teaches us about *her ungreatness* for she is a recipient of undeserved favor. She does not receive judgment from God; instead, she receives exactly the opposite of what she deserved, which is God’s cursing. Graciously, in the place of cursing, God bestowed His blessing upon Mary so that she being “unholy” in herself might give birth to the hope of Israel.

### 3) The core of the message

In contrast to what we have just said about the ungreatness of Mary, the core of the message to her reveals the greatness of Jesus. That is what is so strikingly clear in the text and that is what makes the elevation of Mary so repugnant: <sup>31</sup> **And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.** <sup>32</sup> **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,** <sup>33</sup> **and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end** (1.31-33). There are promises here that elevate the child to come and not the mother who is blessed to be this instrument in the history of redemption.

a) First, the angel promises conception: **behold, you will conceive in your womb** (31).

b) Second, the angel promises a son: **and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus** (31b).

Gabriel told Zechariah what name to give to his son and here he tells Mary what to call her son. You may recall that Jesus is Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. It takes on the meaning of deliverer or savior (from God saves or the Lord is salvation).

c) Finally, the angel promises the greatness of Jesus directly (32-33)

Surely, all our attention ought to be on Jesus who is “a human child, indeed, but a child like none other that ever was born” (Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 148). The core message is that He will be great and that greatness is spelled out in remarkable terms in verses 32-33: . <sup>32</sup> **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,** <sup>33</sup> **and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.**

Mary, your child, Jesus, will be called the Son of the Most High. It is not that He will become God’s Son, but He will have that title because that is who He is. He is God the Son. At the same time, and note these words carefully, His Father in heaven will give Him the throne of

His father David. *He is both David's Son and God's Son*. That is why we sang earlier that He is David's son and David's Lord *at the same time*. His greatness is in the fact that God will make it clear that Jesus is the Son of God as God the Son and His greatness is in the fact that God will give Him the throne of David. He will thus rule over the house of Jacob forever. Finally, with stress on the abiding character of His reign over the house of Jacob, the message is that His kingdom is unending.

In a short answer to the question, "how does He reign over disobedient and judged Israel?" we can affirm that He reigns as Savior-king redemptively. That is, even in the judgment of Israel, God has not forsaken them because He has an elect remnant now just as He did in the days of Elijah (Rom. 11.1-5; note that Paul wrote Romans before Luke wrote his Gospel and Luke has no problem speaking forcefully about Jesus as Israel's king and Savior). We should come away from this text with a profound sense of the greatness of Jesus and this should not be rivaled in our thoughts by anyone. To be emphatic, we should have absolutely no human rival in our worship of Jesus, especially not His saintly but sinful mother in need of grace and in need of a Savior (Lk. 1.47). It is a huge sin to give the glory of the Son to His mother and to give her some kind of role as a mediator when there is one mediator between God and man, Jesus our Lord. In this context of a prospective mother and son, Jesus will be great and greatly to be praised!

## 2A. Mary's dialogue with Gabriel

In contrast to the presupposed sinfulness of Mary that is in the backdrop of the angel's proclamation, her dialogue with Gabriel reveals the holiness of Jesus.

### 1B. Mary's question

<sup>34</sup> **And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"**

Her question coupled as it is with an explanatory phrase (since I am a virgin) shows that she understood the angel to be promising something unheard of and impossible among men and women. The translations give some helpful perspectives on what she is saying (ESV, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" KJV, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" NET, "How will this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?"). By merging the ideas here, we get the full picture. Mary is saying this: "I do not *know* a man." This is the beautiful euphemism of the language of knowing to describe the special bond of husband and wife. In the sharper, poorer, less rich, language of our day, Mary is saying, "I am not sexually active with a man; I am not conducting myself in a way that is necessary for conception to take place, so, how can it be that in the very near future I will conceive?" The idea of "the immediately near future" (for v. 31) comes from the future tense (**you will conceive**) coupled with Mary's response in verse 34 (**And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"**). How can this be, how can I conceive *at any time now* since I have not known a man in the way of sexual intimacy, since I am not sexually involved with a man presently? You see, before we have a virgin birth, we need a virgin conception. That fact surfaces in the dialogue.

### 2B. Gabriel's answer in two parts

Let's take them in reverse order in order to end with the major point.

#### 1) Part two first: the power of God in general (36-37)

<sup>36</sup> **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.** <sup>37</sup> **For nothing will be impossible with God.** It is not mere fill to have these facts about Elizabeth in the angel's message. The angel informs her about Elizabeth, Mary's cousin that the matter of conceiving a son pertains to her also and she is not young like you; this is her

blessing in her old age. She is now in the sixth month of her pregnancy; formerly, she had a reproach filled title, being called barren. Now, she is blessed with a healthy child in her womb. Then, the angel applies God's dealings with Elizabeth to explain how Mary's conception can come about **for nothing will be impossible with God** (v. 37). Elizabeth's case is an illustration of "how this shall be." Your pregnancy, like hers is from God; that is how the miracle will take place (beyond the laws of His general governance of the world).

The angel points Mary to the specific fact of her conception of a son also, particularly, he points her to the fact that this is something extraordinary as a lesser miracle (birth from aged parents) to illustrate the greater miracle (birth without a human father). It is not a perfect parallel, nor could it be (Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 137). A virgin birth is unique; it is still so, despite the modern technique of artificial insemination, which, after all, is artificial.

#### 2) Now part one: the power of the Holy Spirit in particular (35)

In this part of the explanation to Mary, the angel states a radically important implication about the holiness of Jesus. Specific to her question regarding how this shall be, the answer is **The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you** (v. 35a). From this work of the Spirit, the angel makes the following inference: **therefore the child to be born will be called holy- the Son of God** (v. 35b; an interesting use of logic by an angel). Your child, the angel says, will be the son of David but without sin. He will be a true child of the human family but unique, not born in sin: human but not typically human. This is a birth like none other; this is a child like none other. He will have title to holiness because that is what He will be, holy. He will be your son, but more importantly, He will be called the Son of God because that is what He is.

#### 3B. Mary's submission

<sup>38</sup> **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.**

Machen (VB, 132-33): this a wonderful narrative! Mary was possessed of a simple and meditative soul. She meets the strange salutation of the angel with fear and with a perplexed question; but then, when mysteries beyond all human experience are promised her, says simply: "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord be it unto me according to they word." Hers is a unique experience, her son will be conceived in the womb without human father as none other had been conceived during all the history of the human race.

### Conclusion

We should conclude with some comments about Mary's submission and the angel's message.

#### 1) Mary's submission to the virgin conception and birth

Her submission stands up against the great possibility of shame and reproach. This young woman says, "yes, I am pregnant, and I have not lost my virginity." The reply is, "yea, right, now we have heard it all." Notably, her case is just the opposite of the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth. For them the announcement promises the removal of reproach. She merely and understandably questions the manner of what is to come: "I do not see how this can be" (Machen, 141). Nonetheless, Mary does not doubt the reality of what is about to happen. She believes and expresses her belief in truly profound words of submission: **Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.**

Zechariah is promised a long desired son that will remove his reproach; he has OT analogies of conception in old age for perspective. He sins asking for a sign. But Mary is promised the unexpected; something that goes against her maidenly consciousness (142). She has no OT analogies for perspective (the promise to a young woman, as in Isa 7.14, is not so

clear). It is a strange announcement from the angel and the danger of great reproach is imminent. But she submits. No wonder she is praised while Zechariah is disciplined.

In the end, although Mary's case is unique, to put it mildly, she is an example of faith and submission for us to follow with regard to facing reproach out in front of us in doing the will of God. This means that we willingly submit, as Mary did, to possible reproach, incrimination, shame, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation; all unjustly; all with no defense.

## 2) Gabriel's message about the virgin conception and birth

The message of the miraculous comes with jab of a sharp knife. The virgin birth of Jesus informs us as to how He could become fully human while not being sinfully human. Every single child of Adam and Eve is born unholy coming forth from the womb speaking lies. All members of the fallen human family are born in sin including Mary. Thus, the only way that Jesus could be a part of the human race and share in flesh and blood of His mother, and not be tainted by Mary's sinfulness is by a virgin conception and birth. In the fullness of time, Jesus took "man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance" (WCF.8.2).

Thus, we have the scandal of the birth of Christ in front of the scandal of His death. People oppose it as folly not ultimately because it is a miracle that transcends God's usual way of doing things per the laws that science discovers. They oppose it because it is a radical and straightforward indictment of every single member of the human family. All are born in sin, all are born sinners, and therefore, all sin and fall short of the glory of God. For Jesus to become flesh and dwell among us and not share in our sinfulness, His coming had to be by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary.

Accordingly, Mary the sinner received grace from God so that God the Son might come as king and Savior to save sinners and form a new human family by grace, to create a people that share in His holiness for time and eternity.

**May we fall down before the greatness and holiness of Jesus who is both fully God and fully man in order to be our Joshua, our salvation; may the Holy Spirit teach us about the reality of our Savior's humiliation in birth, life and death, and in exaltation by the resurrection to the glory of God the Father, amen.**