

2. Mary Finds Favor with God

Luke 1:26-55

Luke: The Life of Jesus

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

Nearly six months passed after the angel Gabriel had talked to Zechariah in the Temple. If you or I were planning the birth of the Messiah into the world, it is likely that we would have designed it much differently. We would probably see the Savior of the world being born in a big city where he would have had opportunities, born to parents with wealth and high standing in the community, of the upper religious class, perhaps born to a daughter of a high priest. God has a different way of doing things, though. **"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts"** (Isaiah 55:8-9). In God's plan, He sent the angel Gabriel to a small, northern town in Galilee called Nazareth. This little town was not known as one of great importance. Several years later, when Nathaniel was invited to meet the Messiah, Phillip told him that Jesus was of the town of Nazareth, and Nathaniel replied, **"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"** (John 1:46).

God chose an insignificant place not known for anything good. In God's predetermined plan, He has chosen again and again to identify with the poor and disenfranchised of this world. In the wisdom of God, He chose a girl, more than likely around thirteen years of age (which was the age of betrothal at the time), one whose life and walk pleased God, one who was promised in marriage to a humble carpenter. **"Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"** (James 2:5). Again and again, we see that God has His eyes on the poor of this world.

²⁶In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." ²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:26-33).

In his book, *The Day Christ Died*, Jim Bishop talks about Mary's betrothal (engagement) and virginity: "When the two mothers and fathers were agreed, the *qiddushin* took place. This is a formal betrothal and was as binding as a wedding. The *qiddushin* has the finality of marriage. Once the marriage contract was negotiated, even though the marriage ceremony had not occurred, the bridegroom-to-be could not be rid of his betrothed except through divorce. If Joseph had died between *betrothal* and marriage, Mary would have been his legal widow. In the same period, if another man had known her intimately, Mary would have been punished as an adulteress."¹ The

¹ Jim Bishop, *The Day Christ Died*, Printed by HarperSanFrancisco, 1957. Page 91

betrothal period lasted several months, up to a year at most. During her engagement or betrothal, Mary's purity would have been under scrutiny. Isn't it interesting that God chose that time for her to become pregnant?

This time, the angel Gabriel appears to a woman, Mary, and says nothing to Joseph yet. Unlike Zechariah, we read that Mary is not so much struck at the sight of the angel as much as the greeting that he spoke. Mary was greatly troubled by his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The literal sense of the phrase is that she kept pondering or meditating on the angel's greeting. The angel Gabriel told her that the Lord was with her and that she was highly favored! She must have wondered why the angel was telling her these things. For what was she being prepared? It suggests that Mary was a young woman who had some depth to her life, i.e., a reflective side to her that had God on her heart and mind often. Like Mary, we have God with us if we are born-again of the Spirit. Kindness and grace have come to us. How highly favored are those who are called to be the Church of the Living God. As highly favored ambassadors of Christ, we should seek to be strategic in how we use our time, energy, and money. Time spent in personal devotion to God and pondering the thoughts of God is never wasted time.

It is almost as if Gabriel is asking permission from Mary for what she has been chosen to become. God honors our choices in life. He gives us the freedom to choose, but He is looking for those who will willingly lay down their lives in humble service to Him. The angel told Mary that the baby she is to bear should be named Jesus, which means *The Lord is Salvation*. She is highly favored and blessed among women to bear the Son of God, but there was a price involved in this act of service. As Jesus grew up, she had to keep her virgin birth a secret to those in the neighborhood. Think about it. After Herod had killed all those children in Bethlehem up to the age of two years, indeed, she would not want anyone to be aware that she was raising the Messiah, the future King of Israel! At times, it must have been confusing and hard to comprehend. Mary had much to treasure and much to contemplate in her heart.

How do you suppose Mary felt about the angel's message foretelling her supernatural pregnancy? What would have been the hardest to comprehend:

- Being favored by God,
- Getting pregnant as a virgin,
- Who her child was going to be, or
- Explaining her pregnancy to others, especially Joseph and her family?

For those who choose to serve God, there is sometimes a stigma that goes along with serving the God of Glory. What do I mean by stigma? A stigma is a mark of disgrace that sets a person apart in his social web or culture. True Christianity is counter-cultural to the way of this enemy-occupied world. For us to obey God will often create negative attitudes and prejudice in the hearts of those around us leading to discrimination. Jesus himself said, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Mary would have to face misunderstanding and finger-pointing, for how could she say she was pregnant without having laid with a man? Who would believe that from a thirteen-year-old? Can you imagine what it must have been like for her to face the disappointment she surely would have encountered when she told her parents? Mary's faith in God had to be strong and deep to see her through the disgrace she had to

bear. Many years later, as Jesus was talking to the religious elite of the time, he was accused of being illegitimate:

⁴⁰"But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. ⁴¹"You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "**We were not born of fornication**; we have one Father: God" (John 8:40-41).

Did you see their insinuation? "We are not like you," they were saying. "We were not born of sex outside of marriage." We are not told this in Scripture, but it is very likely that, since Jesus was a famous preacher and teacher, being followed by many, the religious Jews had checked out His parentage, and the word on the street in Nazareth was that Mary had an extra-marital affair during her time of betrothal to Joseph. Mary had to endure the stigma of whisperings and shame from those who thought she had sinned. Joseph himself had a hard time believing her story. Following the custom of the day, Joseph could have refused to marry her or had her "sent away quietly" or even stoned, according to Jewish law at that time.

After the angel Gabriel's visit, Mary went to see Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist's parents. When she came back after three months, it became known that she was pregnant. Joseph was about to send her away, for he felt that he could not go ahead with the marriage, knowing that he had not lain with her.

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹And Joseph her husband, **being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.** ²⁰But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-20).

Imagine being told that you were going to give birth to the King of Israel, the long-awaited Messiah who would sit on David's throne. Surely, she must have wondered, "Why me?" On top of that thought, she was further told that this child would be the Son of God.

³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So **the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.** ³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God." ³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her (Luke 1:26-38).

In the Tenach, what Gentile Christians call the Old Testament, we are told that the soon-coming King of Israel would be the Son of God. As we see, this is not a new concept for the Jewish people! We have glimpses of the coming of the Son of God throughout Scripture. For instance:

⁶**I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.** ⁷I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to me, "**You are my son**; today I have become your father. ⁸Ask me, and **I will**

make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. ⁹You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.” ¹⁰Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. ¹¹Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling. ¹²**Kiss his son,** or he will be angry, and your way will lead to your destruction, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. **Blessed are all who take refuge in him** (Psalm 2:6-12).

Then, in the Tanach (The Old Testament), there is a passage in Proverbs 30:4. In speaking about the Holy One of Israel, the Scripture says, “Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and **what is the name of his son?** Surely you know! (Proverbs 30:4). The Lord had spoken ahead of time that the King of Israel, the One that God would install upon the Holy hill of Zion in Jerusalem, would be the divine Son of God. Blessed will be all who take refuge in Him! Do you make your refuge in Him? Then, you are blessed!

Mary’s response to Gabriel was ³⁴“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” What’s the difference between Mary’s response to the angel and Zechariah’s at the beginning of the chapter?

Mary sought to know her part in this. She was saying, “What do you want me to do?” Verse 35 tells us the how. “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” The word *overshadow* was used in the Greek Old Testament to describe God’s presence coming down upon the sanctuary of the Temple. This overshadowing is the same thing that happened to the three disciples at the transfiguration of Christ. Scripture says that a “cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud” (Luke 9:34).

For Mary, this was not a sexual experience at all. The presence of God came upon her, and the eternal Son of God descended into Mary’s womb. It was a creative miracle. We don’t know the timing, but it was likely after her words, “May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). The Holy *Shekinah* presence of God came down on her, and somehow, inside of her, she was aware of a new life inside of her. Are you aware of Christ living in you? Have you ever asked Christ to fill you and give you new life? Why wait? You can receive the Messiah today, not in the same way as Mary, of course. However, the same Holy Spirit wants to fill you with His presence and for Immanuel to be resident in you. Have you ever said to God those same wonderful words of submission, “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said?”

The Virgin Will Conceive

Twice we are told in Luke 1, verse 27, that the Messiah (Christ) was to be born of a virgin, but Mary did not remain a virgin, for she had at least six children after Jesus. After Jesus stepped out into ministry, He preached in His hometown of Nazareth, where the people said, “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” (Matthew 13:55-56).

Why did Mary need to bear Christ while still a virgin? Why is it an essential part of God's story? The virgin birth is a fundamental truth to understand, a truth that is being questioned and explained away. Have you ever wondered why? Why is this truth so powerful? Why is it such a threat to our enemy, Satan? Hundreds of years previously, the prophet Isaiah foretold of One who would come into the world to break Satan's hold on us. He would be born of a virgin and would be called Immanuel, meaning *God with us*:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

When our first ancestor, Adam, chose to disobey God, sin entered the world, and humanity legally fell under Satan's dominion. Paul the Apostle writes about this principle of servitude in his letter to Rome. He wrote,

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey? (Romans 6:16).

Satan had a legal claim for every human being who came into the world, as we are all descendants of Adam. Due to Adam's obedience to Satan and his lies, for the first time, man sinned, and our enemy became to us as a slave owner (Ephesians 2:2). The default in our nature to sin came to all of Adam's race making us become slaves to the one we obey. Because of the Fall, Satan had the power of death over all of us, for all had sinned (Romans 3:23). The only way for humanity to be redeemed (bought back) was through an innocent substitute to pay the penalty—death. God Himself would enter the world, pay the ransom price, and take upon Himself all the judgment that the slaves of Satan had incurred. The blood of an ordinary man would have no efficacy (Webster defines efficacy as meaning: “power to produce effects or intended results”). The seed of a normal human being did not bring forth Jesus. The Holy Spirit conceived Jesus. The sinful nature was passed down through the seed of a man. Teacher and writer Charles Swindoll helps us to understand God's dilemma after the Fall of Man:

The problem of sin and evil creates a unique difficulty. Transgression of God's laws—decrees that reflect His very character—must carry a penalty or the laws are meaningless. Therefore, to simply set aside the penalty of sin would require the Lord to deny His very character. To eradicate sin would destroy the sinner. Gabriel and the other angels probably struggled to understand the Lord's extraordinary efforts to redeem sinful humanity, and they may have found His plan equally perplexing. If the Lord were to explain why God must become a man to redeem humanity, I imagine the conversation might go something like this:

Unable to resolve the dilemma, Gabriel asked, “How will you destroy sin and preserve the people?” The Lord glowed with pleasure at the opportunity to reveal the next detail of His plan. “I will provide a substitute—someone to pay the penalty of sin on their behalf.” “But who? I protested. How can someone pay for the sins of another if he dies paying for his own?” “A very astute question,” He answered. “The substitute must not have any sin of his own.” I was even more perplexed. “But Lord, the substitute would have to be a human to represent humanity, yet all of humanity has been infected with evil. Furthermore, this

substitute would have to be superhuman to pay the penalty for all people, to die a death that would cover not just one sinner's penalty but that of the whole multitude! What substitute could possibly suffice?"

After a short silence, God said, "God." I stood dumbfounded. It didn't seem possible. And if it were, it didn't seem fair. Indeed, it wasn't. This was grace. So characteristic of Him, yet utterly beyond my ability to comprehend. He continued, "I will send My Eternal Son to be the Messiah. He will be the substitute. The Messiah will not be the son of a sinful, earthly father, but My Son, born of a virgin to preserve His sinlessness. The Messiah will be man. The Messiah will be God. Being the God-man, He will represent humankind, yet He will have no sin. Furthermore, after He dies on behalf of all humankind, He will conquer death by rising from the grave." I could not speak. The perfection of His plan—so ingenious, so simple, so intricate—left me even more amazed than seeing Him create the universe with a mere word.²

The writer of the Book of Hebrews explains that, through Christ's death, Satan's power over all that receive God's grace and mercy was broken:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he [Christ] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him [Satan] who holds the power of death—that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:14).

When Satan illegally crucified Jesus, he had no legal right to do so, for Jesus Himself said, **"I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me (John 14:30).**

What did Jesus mean by His statement that Satan had nothing in Him?

Jesus was not under his dominion because He was born with no sin in His life and had never sinned. This is the reason why Christ had to be born of a virgin birth. In this way, there would be no trace of sin passed down to Him through a man. Satan had tried his best to get Jesus to sin, but he had not succeeded. Before the courts of Heaven, Satan legally became a murderer when he took Jesus to the cross, and you know that no murderer has any rights; all rights were taken from him. Through His substitutionary death, Jesus routed Satan. Sometime during the Passover week before Christ's crucifixion, Jesus said, **"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out" (John 12:31).** Judgment happened at the cross, the prince of this world, Satan, had his power broken. God could only do this by Jesus being born as a sinless human, coming as a representative Man by virgin birth. Mary's response to Gabriel's message was **"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).** May that same spirit of submission to God's will be in all of us!

After Mary's angelic visitation, she remembered his word that her relative, Elizabeth, had also conceived a son and was in her sixth month of pregnancy. She decided to make the journey to Judea, around 60-80 miles, depending on where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived. I wonder if she told her parents of her pregnancy before leaving. It is a possibility that her visit to Elizabeth's house

² Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke*, Published by Zondervan, 2012. Page 46

was to get some wise counsel as to how to tell her parents. Before going, could she have shared with Joseph what had happened? I think not. It is likely that only when she returned to Nazareth from Elizabeth's home, being three months pregnant, that it was then she told Joseph and her parents.

It indeed was confirmed to Mary as soon as she crossed the threshold of Elizabeth and Zechariah's house. Elizabeth knew by the Spirit. The Spirit of God came upon her as Mary entered the house, and likely filled John with the Spirit at the same time, for we read of John that **“he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born”** (Luke 1:15).

³⁹At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, **and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.** ⁴²In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” (Luke 1:39-45).

Notice that Elizabeth knew that Mary was to be the mother of the Lord, even as soon as she saw her. There was no time for a letter, no cell phones, but Elizabeth knew by the Spirit just what the plan of God was. Immanuel had come! All of Mary's thoughts and, perhaps, fears of what had taken place inside her, all came out with such words of praise toward God:

⁴⁶And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors” (Luke 1:46-55).

One of the most amazing things to me is the level of submission to God's will by Mary. She didn't ask about the downsides of the decision before she submitted to God's will. She didn't even ask for time to think it over! Right away, she made up her mind to leave all the details to God. Francis Fenelon once said, "Make this simple rule the guide of your life: to have no will but God's." James Graham said, "Promotion, publicity, personality, politics, popularity, and even prosperity we have in abundance. But there is a shortage of God-empowered men and women with a deep love for the Savior, unconditional commitment to Him, and complete indifference to their own well-being." In these last days, we need men and women who will submit to the will of God just as Mary did. She is an example to all of us.

The angel Gabriel said, ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). In what area of your life do you need to believe that nothing is impossible to God? Share with one another a need you have and close in prayer for God to work.

The miracle of the virgin birth is critical to understanding the great plan God had in sending His Son. The church must guard these truths as precious cornerstones of our faith. It should not surprise us that, in the days we live, our faith will be tested. That means not only our walk of faith but also the very foundations of our faith, the Word of God. Do you believe that our God is a miracle-working God? Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and was born of a virgin? Do not let go of these precious truths, for they are guiding lights that will keep you in His way.

Close in prayer for God to work in supernatural ways in these last days.

Prayer: Lord, help us to be as open and willing as Mary was. Help us not to miss the moments when You would come and speak to our hearts. We treasure the truth of Your word. We ask that You show Yourself strong on our behalf and that we see Your wonders in these last days.

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