

## Overshadowed by God: The Miraculous Message of the Virgin Birth

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).

The Bible, as I'm sure you are aware, is composed of two Testaments – the Old and New. Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament chronologically and in the order of books. Matthew is the first of the New Testament. In most Bibles, these books are separated by only a page or two, and therefore you might not realize that between the accounts of Malachi and Matthew there are 400 hundred years.

During this time, the nation of Israel was taken captive by Babylon, returned in remnants, and began the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Over this 400 year period the people of Israel endured the rule of the Persians (539-331 B.C), the Egyptians (320-198), the Syrians (198-164), and the Romans (63 B.C. – 70 A.D.).

This time period is called the Intertestamental Period or Second Temple Judaism, and it is an important time in Jewish history. For example, it was during this period that an old priest and his five sons led a revolt against the Syrian occupation. One of his sons, Judas Maccabaeus, was able to win independence, and in 164 BC the people cleansed the temple and resumed daily sacrifices. This great Jewish victory is still commemorated every year. Do you know what it is called? Hanukkah – the festival of lights. And this celebration ushered in the only season (approximately 100 years) where Jews ruled Jews.

While 400 hundred years is a long time (at least four generations – your great-grandfather), it is even longer when you consider the fact that God is silent during these years. The tabernacle of Moses's day and the temple of Solomon's day saw the manifest presence of God appear (see Exodus 40 and 2 Chronicles 7). But Ezekiel 10 records that the glory of God left the temple, and as it leaves God makes a promise:

19 And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God (Ezek 11:19-20).

The period between Malachi and Matthew has a rebuilt temple, but no presence of God. They have scribes and priests, but there is no definitive word from the Lord. There are no prophets who hear from God (1 Maccabees 9:27, 14:41-42). They have a temple. They have a nation. But they have no word from God. The promise in Ezekiel seems like it has been forgotten. God is gone.

However, God has not forgotten his people, and our text this morning records the glorious breaking of the silence of God. He shatters the silence with the announcement that his presence will come again but not in the form of a cloud or fire. His presence will come in the form of a helpless baby. God breaks 400 years of silence with the announcement of a child's birth. He breaks four generations of silence with the virgin birth!

Let's see what that was like and what we can learn.

## **The Setting**

Our text begins with an overview of the situation in which God dramatically intervenes. Luke sets the stage here for the reader to understand what is happening. There are six details to note:

- This event takes place 6 months into Elizabeth's pregnancy which happened after an angel had appeared to Zechariah while he was serving in the temple, announcing the miraculous birth of John the Baptist (see Luke 1:5-25). Zechariah and Elizabeth were barren and well beyond the age of bearing children.
- The angel Gabriel, who was God's special messenger and who was sent to Zechariah, is now dispatched on another mission.
- Gabriel is sent to Nazareth, a non-descript city about 70 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It is a city that is viewed as a non-prestigious place to grow-up, an "other-side-of-the-tracks" sort of place.
- The angel is sent to a unmarried and chaste woman who is betrothed, which means that she was legally bound to a man but that the official wedding day was yet to come.

- The man's name is Joseph and he is "of the house of David", indicating an important legal link to the Davidic throne and God's promise of a perpetual ruler from David's family (see 2 Samuel 7:12-16).
- Finally we learn that the virgin's name is Mary.

It has been 400 years since God has spoken directly to his people. They are living in the Promised Land but they are oppressed by foreign nations. They have physical temple, but there is no sense of God's presence. They are God's people, but it seems that there is no hope.

However, God breaks that silence with a hope-filled announcement.

### **The Announcement**

Verse 28 says that Gabriel came to Mary with a greeting and information that at first were confusing and a bit alarming. The angel said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" The angel calls her "favored one" which means that she is a recipient of God's unmerited favor. It is used in a similar way in Ephesians 1:6 where Paul says, "to the praise of his glorious grace which he has **freely given us** in the One he loves." (NIV) Mary is a woman who has already received God's grace but she's not aware of all the implications.<sup>1</sup> God is drawing near to her with great and unbelievable blessings.

The angel's statement is not very clear to Mary. The text says that she was "greatly troubled" at the saying. The words "greatly troubled" mean to agitate, to bother, and to confuse. This statement by the angel created internal tension for Mary; it was bothersome because she didn't know all of what this meant. Further, she was not sure what kind of greeting this really way. Verse 29 says that she "tried to discern what kind of greeting this might be." In other words she was suspicious of the real message that the angel was bringing. Gabriel was bringing news, but she wasn't totally sure if it was good news because often the announcements of God brought both blessings and judgments. God has just rocked Mary's world, and she's trying to figure out what it all means.

The angel must have noticed Mary's guardedness because he repeats himself and adds something more. He begins by telling her "Don't be afraid." This is a common statement by angels when they encounter human beings. Gabriel told Zechariah to not be afraid (1:13) and the angel sent to the shepherds said the same thing (2:10). An encounter with a heavenly being normally brings this kind of response. And then he emphasizes that she has "found favor with God." (v 30)

Now this is where the Catholic Church derives the doctrine of Immaculate Conception which means that Mary was sinless. Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854:

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<sup>1</sup> The Perfect Tense and Passive Mood mean that this is something that has already happened to Mary with ongoing implications for her.

“The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.”<sup>2</sup>

This is another illustration of a great doctrinal divide. The Catholic Church believes that Mary had to be righteous **in order** to obtain favor from God. Therefore, she must be sinless before obtaining favor. However, the Protestant and Evangelical view is that Mary received favor **despite** her inherited unrighteousness. The difference is colossal. The question is whether one receives grace **because of righteousness - including your own (Catholic view)**, or if one receives grace **to produce righteousness (Evangelical view)**. Or to put it in a question: “Is grace a gift through imputed righteousness or is grace a gift because of achieved righteousness?” We would say that Mary, while still a sinner, received divine favor or God’s grace.

What the angel announces next is the most important news and the greatest of God’s interventions into human history. It is the beginning of what will be called “the good news” or the gospel. “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” (v 31) God is going to intervene through a means hinted at in Isaiah 7 where it says, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel.” But now it is becoming a reality!

But this is no ordinary baby. His birth, who he is, what he represents, and what he will do are all tied together. In Isaiah his name is called Immanuel which means “God with Us.” In Luke we learn that his name is Jesus which means “the Lord is salvation.” In Matthew’s account (Matt1:22) he adds, “for he will save his people from their sins.”

The angel explains even further and gives Mary four additional and amazing descriptions:

- **“He will be great.”** The Greek word is *meegas*, and it means something unusual, extraordinary, amazing, and supreme. It can also mean central, preeminent, and sovereign.
- **“He will be called the Son of the Most High.”** Literally the text reads “Son of Highest,” and it means that this baby is more than just a small child; he is the Son of God, offspring of the Highest. A comparable word in England might be “majesty” which is both a descriptive word and a title if you are part of the royal family.
- **“The Lord will give him the throne of his father David.”** He is the fulfillment of this promise made to David: “I will raise up your offspring who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.” (2 Sam 7:12)

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II - editor, Catechism of the Catholic Church (New York, New York: Doubleday Publishers, 1995), 136

- **“He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end.”** The angel promises a permanent rule of this king over his people. This son will usher in the fulfillment of every promise in the Bible and every hope of the Jewish people – that Shalom would finally come. Even today a common greeting for Jewish people is “Shalom.” It is Jesus who finally brings that peace, restoring creation back to what it was before the presence of sin.

What an amazing description and an even more amazing event! Think of it: Jesus was the intervention of God into the world. He was the message of God to the world after 400 years of silence. He was the fulfillment of everything promised, and he would become the greatest disclosure of God to mankind. God speaks in a whole new way – not through a prophet delivering an oracle – but through a son. Hebrews 1:1-3 records the following summary of this great truth:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

It is through this son that atonement will be made, and it is he who will reign. He will be both redeemer and ruler, a combination that only God could have designed.

### **The Solution**

Mary, while amazed at this statement, is left with a nagging question: “How?” She is not married so how is this promise going to be fulfilled in her. Her question is not one of doubt or disbelief; it is an honest question from a woman who is being told about something that seems impossible.

The angel answers her question with a statement that increases the mystery and awe of Jesus’s birth. In short he tells her that God is going to put a child in her womb. What an amazing thing to say! It is a remarkable display of God’s power, and to make that point even more obvious, the angel gives Mary another example. He says, “Behold your relative Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.” I love this statement for many reasons. First, I love this because Elizabeth is probably one of the few women who loved to be called “old.” Can you imagine someone seeing her – maybe pushing 70 years old – and she is pregnant! I can hear her say, “Can you believe an old woman like me being pregnant?” Secondly I love this because of the fact that it says “who was called barren.” This had to have been such a shameful and hurtful thing for Elizabeth to bear. But look what God does! He took her shame away. It is such a beautiful picture of what God does in so many ways.

The angel said, "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." (Luke 1:35) This child would be born of supernatural means and protected from sin. The virgin birth created the possibility of a son who is human, sinless, and divine. It is the surprising and supernatural solution to the human need for atonement and forgiveness. The virgin birth means that Jesus is the God-man. Therefore, he can live a sinless life, die undeservedly on the cross, bear the sins of all who would believe in him, and create the possibility of sinners receiving forgiveness. The virgin birth ushers in the redemptive plan of God where Jesus became sin even though he knew no sin that we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

In former times – in the Old Testament – God’s presence was marked by the overshadowing reality of a cloud of smoke or fire. This time, however, his glory and his power are coming upon a young woman. His presence is coming, not in the outward display of power, but in the humble birth of a baby who will bring permanent redemption and peace.

As you can see the virgin birth of Jesus is extremely important, deeply mysterious, and filled with profound meaning.

## **The Message**

So what does the virgin birth tell us? There are both theological and personal realities here that we need to observe and consider.

### **1. The word “impossible” is not in God’s vocabulary**

This account reaches its crescendo in verse 37, and it is a hope-laden statement made by the angel that summarizes everything that is happening here. He says, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” This is the heart of the gospel and the message of the virgin birth: nothing is impossible for God. Nothing.

The virgin birth boldly declares that there is no limitation to God, nothing surprises him, nothing hinders him, and nothing can stop him. He never runs out of resources; he never lacks energy; he never runs out of solutions; he’s never late; and never worries what to do. Two of the most hopeful words in all the Bible are “But God.” There are few more hopeful statements that Ephesians 2:1-9 -

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup>

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

The same God who designed and orchestrated the virgin birth is the same God who today sits on the throne. Nothing is impossible for him! Nothing. “Impossible” is not in his vocabulary.

## **2. The plan of God often involves surprising, scandalous solutions**

God chooses Mary, bestows grace upon her, puts a child in her womb, and plans to save the world through something viewed as a scandal. The conception and birth of Jesus will be outside of the norm, it will be marked by mystery, and it will be scandalous. And yet isn't this often how God works? Even the crucifixion of Jesus was like this! It was outside of the norm (“how can one be saved by a man who is cursed?”), marked by mystery (darkness, earthquake, ripping of the veil), and a scandal (“you believe in someone who was crucified by the Romans?”). But this is how God works. He specializes in redemptive actions that are stunning and surprising, and he invites us to join him in the scandal of grace.

I'm sure that Mary endured many strange, condemning looks. I'm sure that she had to bear up under the pain of wondering what people were thinking about her. She wasn't the first, and she certainly won't be last.

12 So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. 13 Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. 14 For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. 15 Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. (Heb 13:12-15)

God's plans often involve going with him “outside the camp.” We don't follow Jesus because of the fame, the prestige, the logical sense of it all, or the short-term outcomes. We follow the plan of God because we have been captivated the beauty of Jesus and we want to be like him. And so we follow him – even outside the gate.

## **3. The favor of God is unmerited, overwhelming, and compels obedience**

Mary was a wonderful young woman, but she, like us, was fundamentally sinful. And we see in the virgin birth a great picture of how God intervenes in our lives. He loves, calls, converts, and redeems people **despite** our sinfulness. Romans 5:8 says, “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God's grace doesn't just come into your life, it invades you, conquers you, and woos you!

When you understand the nature of God's grace like this is motivates you to obey. Rules, fear, threats and pressure pale in comparison to the conquest of your heart through unmerited favor. Thus Mary says in verse 38, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

#### **4. The silence of God is not the absence of God**

Finally, let me finish where we began: between the testaments and 400 years of silence. The virgin birth says that God is coming to his people again! The silence between the testaments is equally a part of God's plan as the virgin birth. I'm sure that the people of Israel felt like silence meant that God had left. But he hadn't. He was waiting for just the right time to explode his grace upon the scenery of human history.

So be sure that you don't confuse the silence of God with his absence. There are moments that we all face – I call them the dark side of God's will – where it seems, for a season, that God is gone. He is not!

Christmas 2010 may be a hard one of some of you. It may be the first year with a loved one not at the table. It may be yet another year without a little one that you've longed for. It may be the first year of Christmas all by yourself. It may be Christmas that you fear may be the last for a loved one. Or it may be a Christmas that seems so uncertain because your future is not clear.

To those of you in that position today and to those who will face seasons like that in 2011, I just want you to look at the virgin birth and to be reminded that one of God's greatest and most defining acts came when most people gave up.

There are many messages in the virgin birth, but for some of you it is this one: God has a plan; you're just between the testaments.

Take heart, God is not absent. He may be silent for a while but he's not absent. And the virgin birth tells us that loud and clear!

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