

Part 4: Impossibly Good News

Tyler Velin | Luke 1:26-38

December 5, 2021

Today, in Luke's account of the gospel of Jesus Christ we encounter what is probably the most hotly contested story in religious history: that is the account of Mary, the virgin, who conceives through divine intervention with eternal second person of the Trinity, God the Son, Jesus Christ.

If you were to search the internet about the virgin birth, you will probably find articles and opinions portraying Luke's account today as an unbelievable myth akin to other pagan religions.

One opinion piece written in 2019 attempted to show that the Christian fable of the Virgin Mary conceiving is nothing more than a copy-cat account of other pagan myths. The author went on to list a handful of examples as if they were fact. I went and looked up all of those examples, and none of them include accounts of historically verified individuals with credible testimonies. For example, Attis, the pagan god of vegetation was alleged to be born of a virgin, or of an almond. More commonly though it is believed he was the son of another god named Agdistis.

In surveying the field of ancient religions there is no account of a virgin conception of a historically verified figure, who went on to be born, die, and rise again as Jesus Christ is said to have. This is not another myth, this is distinct from anything else.

Another article published in 2015 in the Guardian had a big pop up bubble which says: "Most scholars agree that virgin is probably a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for young woman." This would be a compelling argument if that Hebrew word only meant "young woman" which it did not. Additionally Mary's response in this text has been made PG for us in our English translation today when it reads, "How can this be for I am a virgin." But the Greek word she uses is not the noun "virgin" which is used earlier in the narrative. What she literally says is: "How can this be for I have not known a man."

The author of that article is right in that every scholar who denies the virgin birth believes that "virgin" must mean something other than "virgin." But it would appear that Mary herself, who tradition had it personally gave this account to Luke, believed with conviction that this was a virgin birth.

Luke, the historian, who is seeking to verify, who is also a doctor who understands biology, is not ashamed to include this detail.

The Pew Research Forum did two studies in 2014 and 2017, remarkably both found that the majority of Americans do believe in the virgin birth. However, the rates have declined from 73% of Americans to 66% of Americans over those years.

While white and black evangelical Protestants hold a 95% affirmation of the virgin birth, I can say quite certainly that 100% of those who are truly Christian believe the virgin birth. One other critic said that outside of the birth narratives in the New Testament, the explicit reference to Mary's virgin conception is never mentioned. Which is a very fancy way to say that outside of all the times the Bible speaks of the virgin conception, it never speaks of the virgin conception.

The miracle we read today is not a myth that we can either take or leave when it comes to believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ. To deny what we read today is not just to deny the experience of Mary, or the historical writing of Luke, it is to deny the very substance of God's promise to save his people through his son, Jesus Christ. You can have a historical Jesus without the virgin birth, you can have a moral Jesus without the virgin birth, you can perhaps have a miraculous Jesus without the virgin birth, but you cannot have the Messiah Jesus without the virgin birth.

All of what Jesus came to do can only be done if he were 100% God and 100% man. This divine mystery is upheld in our passage today. To lose the virgin birth is to lose the promise of God. Therefore it would be incredibly foolish and reckless for all of Christendom to place so much emphasis on this one piece of history if it were not true. But it is true.

And it's this miraculous account which we are going to look at today. What we are going to see event are two things. First we are going to see the way in which this birth announcement is **The Fulfillment of God's Great Promise**, but secondly in looking at Mary's response to all of this we are going to see **The Comfort of God's Great Promise**.

Behind the story of the virgin birth is not merely a nurse tale, Christian apologetic, or a prophetic coincidence. Behind this story is the reality of a God for whom nothing is impossible which is good news for those who sit in impossible circumstances.

Let's read the whole of our passage once more and then we will dive into the wonderful promise of God in this text: **Luke 1:26-38**.

Six months after the faithful, but barren, Elizabeth conceived, Gabriel was sent to announce God's movement once more. This time to a virgin, named Mary.

We are going to dive into Mary's experience of this promise in our second point today. But first we are going to zoom out and look backwards in history to see the significance of this birth. This is our first point: **The Fulfillment of God's Promise**.

Wrapped up in Gabriel's announcement is the sense that the story of Jesus is the climax of the plan of redemption that God has been faithfully working since the very beginning.

Since Adam and Even rebelled against God, and as a result were removed from his holy and life-giving presence, God made a plan to win back his people, defeating the sin that separated, restoring the holy nature which was lost, and ruling and reigning over his people with intimate joy and nearness.

The story of scripture is not a story of how man can get to God, but it's a story of how the Triune God of the Bible came to men in order to save them and restore them in the gospel.

And here, as a baby named Jesus was said to be conceived in Mary's womb, three key aspects of this long awaited plan were being clarified.

The first aspect of that promise is that Jesus would come as God's distinct Son (***Jesus as God's distinct son***).

Look back at what Gabriel told Zechariah about John the Baptist: **Luke 1:14-16**. So here John is going to be great before the Lord. Why? Because he is going to play a distinct role. He is going to be set apart from alcohol, filled and filled with the Holy Spirit, so that he might turn the hearts of people to the Lord.

John was going to be great because of the role he would play and what he would do. But look at what is said about Jesus to Mary: **Luke 1:31-32**.

Here, Jesus also will be great. But why will he be great? Because he will be Son of the Most High. In other words John is going to be great because of what he was going to do. Jesus was going to be great because of who he was.

Jesus was the Son of the Most High. Jesus was not just a child of God, he was the Son of God.

“Most High” was a title for God used nearly 100 times in the Old Testament. This proclamation shows us that Jesus is not only God’s distinct Son, but we also see a second distinction: ***Jesus as the Distinct God-Man***. And it’s here we see the paradox and significance of the virgin birth.

Read with me **Luke 1:34-35**

The virgin birth is unique because it was both human and divine. It was a human event as there was a baby, conceived in a womb, a womb of a virgin, whose name is Mary, and that baby will grow and be nourished by a placenta, and be born by natural birth, and will grow and need air and food and sleep just like every other man who has ever lived.

And yet this is a divine event. In this passage God the Father, the Most High, is going to work in tandem with God the Holy Spirit to cause Mary to conceive without intercourse, with the incarnate and eternal God the Son, and his name will be Jesus.

Now this is a paradox, and one which we cannot understand but we can believe. The paradox is this: That the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, co-equal and of the same essence of the Father, who existed as eternally begotten by the Father, would be born as a man.

Our family has been attempting to explain to our kids the doctrine of the Trinity. So as we were driving the other day I asked my kids who God was. They answered, “There is one God in three persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.”

I then asked them who was born at Christmas. They all said, “Jesus.” But then I asked them if God the Son existed before Jesus was born. They were quiet for a bit, and my oldest questionably said, “Yes...”

And he was right! God the Son existed eternally without beginning. But his existence in the flesh and with the name of Jesus began here in Luke 1. The son who was eternally God, here also became fully man. Not 50/50. But the paradox of 100/100.

But more than that I asked my kids what happened after Jesus died. My daughter responded, “he ascended to the right hand of God the Father.” I said, “You’re right.” So what is Jesus now? Is he still the God man?

Yes! The wonder of the incarnation is that Jesus now and always is not only eternally God the Son, but his is forever our brother in the flesh, our great high priest who lives forever. And he, in his physical resurrection, is a foretaste into our physical, bodily resurrection from the dead.

That's the infinite mystery of the virgin birth, that in being conceived by the work of the Holy Spirit and of Mary, he was fully God and fully man in the flesh. This was a profound miracle.

Yet it was an awaited miracle. God had tipped his hand to this being the means of salvation for his people all the way back in Isaiah.

At that time the forces of Assyria were bearing down on Israel and people thought that God had forgotten his promise to them. But God never forgets, even when it seems he has.

So the Lord was going to give a sign, there was going to be a young woman who would conceive and that child born would be influential keeping the people of Israel safe. But look at how God speaks of this event: **Isaiah 7:14**.

The Lord, to save his people was going to cause a virgin to conceive, the child would deliver God's people and his name would be Immanuel which means, "God with us."

In Matthew's gospel he explicitly ties Gabriel's announcement to this text. But Luke does so in a more subtle way. Remember how Gabriel greeted Mary: **Luke 1:28**.

The Lord is with her. How? Because she was going to be pregnant with Immanuel, God with us. This is the last point of fulfillment here: **Jesus as the Distinct King**. Look again at **Luke 1:32-33**.

Not only was God going to enter into humanity himself in the person of Jesus. Not only was God going to once again save and deliver his people. But God had sent, and Jesus was going to forever be the king God's people were waiting for.

The hope of God's promise was always in his King. God promised Abraham that kings would come from him, and in that kingdom the nations would be blessed. While the human kings which followed looked bleak at best, look at the promise God made to King David in **2 Samuel 7:12-14a**. God was going to put someone, from David's line, on the throne of Israel forever!

This promise reared its head again in **Isaiah 9:6-7**. This prophecy here is connected to the prophecy of the virgin birth in Isaiah 7. It's that child born of a virgin who would establish forever God's Kingdom. As we read the description of that Kingdom, who wouldn't want to live under that King.

Jesus, is that King. That's what he is going to call people towards, and that's what he is going to die to establish. Jesus had come as God's messiah. He was going to be the eternal king because he was the eternal son. He was going to be the ransom for men, because he was fully man.

In Genesis 1, God made the first man by breathing his breath into the dust of the ground. Here in Luke 1, by the work of the Holy Spirit, God brought into existence the new man who would make the restoration of a broken creation possible.

What we sing about when we sing Christmas carols is nothing less than the very hope upon which all God's children sit. The hope is that God keeps his promises and humbled himself by taking on flesh and living among us.

The story of Jesus is a story that makes sense of all of human history, its brokenness and our longing for it to be restored. But it also is a story that makes sense of our lives. The power of God's promise not only invaded history in Jesus, but it invaded the lives of real people.

This is our second point this morning: **The Comfort of God's Great Promise.**

Knowing God keeps his promise in Jesus not only changes things. It changes lives. To believe this message is to have your life changed by this message. This is where we consider the experience of Mary in this text. Here we see in Mary both the joy of God's favor and the conviction of God's faithfulness.

First, let's examine ***The Joy of God's Favor***. Read with me **Luke 1:28-30**.

Mary is greeted by Gabriel with a remarkable greeting: Greetings, O favored one!

The result of this is that like Zechariah, Mary is fearful. But the word Luke uses here is not the same as the word he uses with Zechariah. In fact it's a word which is used only this time in the New Testament and it expresses great fear.

This week in our Bible reading group on Wednesday we were in Hebrews 1 and it says that Jesus came to "deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

As a people we live in fear of death. COVID has exposed this to a degree in our society as of late, and we see people who live in paralyzing fear. For some of us perhaps this fear is more acute. We rarely realize it, but much of the decisions we make in life are driven by the fear of what we might one day lose, and what we hope to maintain.

But whether you feel the pressing weight of the fear of death here on this earth, each of us will feel it when we stand before God himself. And here, Mary in her common state, is fearful before the Lord as each and every one of us will be.

But Mary is said to be a favored one. Literally, "one who has received favor." Her fear is then spoken to again by Gabriel saying, "Don't fear, you have found favor with God." The only thing which can save us from fear is the favor of God.

What is this favor? Part of it is in the unique role Mary would play as the mother of Jesus. But part of the favor is also that anywhere the message of salvation is proclaimed, heard and accepted, there is the Lord's favor. The message which crushes the fear of those who stand before God is the message of God's favor through Jesus Christ.

The words Luke uses in verse 28 and 30 share the same Greek root *charis* which is translated in other places as "grace." What Mary received, what Gabriel proclaimed to her was God's immense favor, favor in God's immense grace.

What did Mary do to deserve such favor? Nothing. We saw Zechariah and Elizabeth were exceedingly righteous. But Luke doesn't give us any background like that for Mary. Zechariah was a priest serving the Lord, Mary was a virgin with no familial fame. Zechariah was in Jerusalem, the center of political and religious power. Mary was in Nazareth a small town of zero significance.

Yet of all the people who could have been chosen to bear Jesus, Mary was chosen. Why? Because that's how grace works. We do nothing to deserve it. It is simply declared to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ and when we respond with hearts of faith all our fear is put to death.

Paul uses many of the same word Luke does when he says this in **Ephesians 1:4b-6**. How has God showed his glorious grace, his glorious favor to us? In the Beloved. That is in Jesus!

The Roman Catholic Church takes this verse and twists it to turn Mary and this distinct favor into a semi-divine idol. But the beauty of Mary's favor is that it is for all who receive the message of Jesus Christ!

How does God look favorably on us? How do we know God loves us? By receiving the message of his son by faith. In the midst of a fearful world, and an awe producing God, we must always find ourselves to be reminded of God's favor to us in Jesus.

Mary's life from this point on was not going to be a cakewalk. But to actually receive grace from God, to know God has been favorable to you in Jesus Christ, is to submit the whole of our lives to him in faith and that helps us in our fear.

This is where we see the second comfort of God's promise: ***The conviction of God's faithfulness.***

Read with me once more our closing verses: **Luke 1:34-38**.

What Mary shows us in both her responses to this message is a commitment to believe and act in light of God's faithfulness to her.

One thing you'll probably notice is that it seems Mary got off easy compared to Zechariah. Zechariah said to Gabriel: "How shall I know this?" And Gabriel made Zechariah mute because he didn't believe.

But when Mary asks a question she is not only given an explanation, but a confirmation: Elizabeth also conceived!

Why is that? I believe it's because Zechariah was concerned about the *if* and Mary was concerned with the *how*.

You see, Zechariah was married and he had the means to go home and try to conceive with his wife. His doubt was that this would work at all. Mary's doubt was how this would work for she was a virgin!

Here she's told she'll get pregnant, and yet she has no means of getting pregnant! What a great example for many of us as to how unwilling Mary was to sin against God.

How quick are some of us to baptize our sin with some idea that we are ultimately serving God. Perhaps we think that we can get angry and abusive with our families because it seems to be the most effective way to help them obey Jesus. I'm not being harsh, I'm being diligent to train and correct.

Or how many of us enter into dating relationships with non-believers because doesn't God want them to be saved? We look at pornography because it's better than actually sleeping with someone.

If you have ever been engaged you know the ever increasing weight of sexual temptation as time goes on. Here, Mary could have easily said, "Well if God wants me to get pregnant, I'll swing over to Joseph's apartment after work and we will fulfill some prophecy!"

But here Mary knows that God never calls us into sin in order to reap his promise. She wants to know how God is going to do this without her being sinful in the process. A commitment to God's faithfulness is a conviction that God will be faithful to do what he promised in our life without the aid of sin. The solution here: God will do it.

Mary would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit, this might seem wonderful to us as it makes for a great Christmastime story. But for Mary, this mantle would certainly be a burden.

Under the Old Testament law, any one, male or female, who was found to be having sex outside of marriage was liable for punishment. Even more than that because Mary was betrothed, and if the man who impregnated her wasn't Joseph, it would be considered adultery and carried an even more significant punishment: death.

On top of that, the Jewish system at that time had been so influenced by the Roman Empire that it refused to acknowledge the testimony of women as witnesses. Whereas God's law gave women a credible voice as a witness, in this culture, where the law was being perverted, a woman's testimony was considered worthless.

So not only would it look like Mary had acted inappropriately, but even if she was raped by a man and made pregnant, unless another man was willing to testify on her behalf it would mean nothing. On top of that there was no reasonable story behind this pregnancy, but instead her only claim was: "The Lord did it."

We know from Matthew's account that even Joseph himself, though a reasonable and kind man, found this argument hard to believe until Gabriel told him himself that it was true.

Whether Mary knew it in this moment or not, what stood before her was nine months of being whispered about, doubted, spoken ill of, and even disbelieved by her own fiancé.

But look at her response: **Luke 1:38**.

Mary was being called to do something that was both a privilege and a burden and her response was: I am the servant of the Lord let this thing that God wants to happen, happen exactly how he wants.

Where Zechariah of all people, a priest, in the temple with a wife, should have been the first to exercise this faith, it is the small town virgin who manifests such beautiful submission to the plan and purpose of God because she is convicted of God's faithfulness.

Why? Because she believed what Gabriel said: **Luke 1:37**.

With God, nothing is impossible. This is what it looks like to rest in God's faithfulness. Mary thought:
If God was going to bring about his eternal son into human form, he could do this.
If God was going to bring about his forever king, he would not abandon me.
If God was going to answer his promise to save, he would show me favor.
If God answered Elizabeth in her distress, he will also care for me in mine.
If a God like this chooses to act, nothing will be impossible for him.
So I'm going to trust him.

If God can be trusted to bring salvation to all his people through the incarnation, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, can't we trust Jesus with our own lives?

At the end of Jesus' life was his humble prayer to the Father, "Not my will but yours." Here at the beginning, his mother said, "Let it be to me according to your will." What will the story of God's faithfulness be in your life?

What would it look like for you to respond like Mary did? For some of you, it might look like coming to Jesus for the first time. It is only here, in believing in all this miraculous child would do, that you have hope.

But for those who have come to Jesus, what does trusting Jesus look like in your life? What does trusting Jesus look like in your fight against sin? Or in your obedience when the way forward seems difficult.

This text today is full of paradoxes which seem impossible, but at the end, where God is, nothing is impossible. So if that's true, if in Jesus Christ we have received favor, then let's do this. Let's give ourselves to this God and let our lives be lived in faithful submission to his word.