

Luke

*The Virgin Birth
(Luke 1:34-38)*

With Study Questions

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10/22/2023*

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Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" ³⁵ And the angel answered and said to her, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.* ³⁶ Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. ³⁷ For with God nothing will be impossible." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her (Luke 1:34-38).

Introduction

In one sense, the story we are in the midst of is homey and bucolic. What is more provincial than the birth of baby Jesus? In a couple of months homes throughout the area will don the nativity. Hot cocoa will warm our palates while the Mary, Joseph and the wise men will warm our hearts. Churches will be filled with songs of the virgin birth. It all seems very light and harmless.

Unlike other stories or teachings in the Bible, the virgin birth doesn't generally incur the bile often associated with controversial theology—at least not within the boundaries of the church. Like the Trinity, the virgin birth is such a non-negotiable for Christians that it is left to peacefully relax.

The virgin birth is not like eschatology (the doctrine of end times) or pneumatology (the view of the work of the Holy Spirit). Christians often disagree on those teachings. Not so with the virgin birth. On this topic, any disagreement is between Christian and non-Christian. To borrow, and slightly alter, a phrase uttered by Calvin on another topic, "boldness in disputing [the virgin birth] is the mother of unbelief."¹

In his study on the virgin birth, J. Gresham Machen concluded "there can be no doubt that at the close of the second century the virgin birth of

¹ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). [*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 46). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

Christ was regarded as an absolutely essential part of the Christian belief by the Christian church in all parts of the known world.” The Apostles’ Creed contains an ancient, very brief statement orthodox Christianity. To land outside this creed is to land outside the Christian faith. As brief as it is, it invests quite a few words to the virgin birth:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

It is notable that it then moves straight to His suffering under Pilate and being crucified, with no reference to anything in between. His entire life is left out. The same is true of the Nicene Creed. All this to say that, biblically speaking, the virgin birth is highly significant. Little wonder that it is often an event that the world and heretics seek to deny or morph.

One way the world seeks to (often smugly) deny the virgin birth is to point out how many myths and fables have virgin births. In India, Krishna was born of a virgin called Devaki. Buddha was believed by his followers to be begotten of a virgin named Maya. Siam had a religious figure born of virgin named Codom. Lao-Tsze from a Chinese religion (3468 B.C.) was said to been born of a virgin, and more. The claim is that many of these deities pre-date Christ, so Jesus has to just get in the middle of the line-up.

What do we make of this? Two brief answers: First, if the amount of “scholarly” muscle used to deny the virgin birth of Christ (muscles unable to shift a single gram of biblical truth) was applied to any of the above, none of these assertions of virgin births could stand the review. Secondly, it makes sense that religions or myths would borrow the idea of a miraculous birth, since this type of thing goes all the way back to Abraham (Genesis 17). There is no religion that predates the Christian faith.

We see similar arguments against the flood, since so many world myths and fables have a flood story. Of course, it would make sense for the stories of history (true or mythological) to have a flood story if a flood actually happened. Let us not get lost in the crowd of would-be virgin births.

But it is not merely the world, it is also the heresies which seek to deny or deemphasize the virgin birth. Popular modern-day pop-theologian, Rob Bell argued that it wouldn’t really be a big deal if we

discovered that “Jesus had an earthly father named Larry.” This would not be catastrophic, according to Bell, because Jesus would still be the best possible way to live. But being the best possible way to live, though this is true of Jesus, does not really hit the essence of why the Father sent the Son and why it was necessary for Him to be born of a virgin.

Let’s seek to answer a few questions as we pour our minds and hearts over the narrative: 1. Does the Bible teach that Mary was actually a virgin? 2. How did it happen? 3. Why is it critical to the faith? 4. What was Mary’s response?

Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?”

A Virgin?

Watching a movie where four Hollywood stars were pretending to be rabbis, they were dialoguing on the meaning of Isaiah 7:14.

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

They spoke of scribal errors and how the word “virgin” *almah*, in this passage could mean young woman and not necessarily a virgin. The word *almah* occurs nine times in the Old Testament, and wherever the context makes its meaning clear, the word refers to a virgin.

More importantly, the Septuagint translates *almah* with the Greek word *parthenos* (the same word used in Matthew 1:23 where Isaiah 7:14 is quoted), and everyone agrees that *parthenos* means “virgin.” The Jewish translators of the Septuagint would not have used a clear Greek word for virgin if they understood Isaiah 7:14 to refer to nothing more than a young woman.

Add to this, that God is here promising a “sign.” As wonderful and beautiful as childbirth is, if it is merely a normal birth by a normal young woman, it falls quite short of being a sign, since it was happening numerous times a day.

Finally, the text has already told us that Gabriel was sent “**to a virgin**” (Luke 1:27). When Mary she does not know a man, she is conveying that she has not been intimate with a man. And there is no indication, anywhere in Scripture, that this merely means that she is currently a virgin but will soon consummate her marriage. Nor is it a commitment to perpetual virginity. These types of additions to the account militate against what we’re about to read regarding how she will come to be with child.

It has also been observed (though this is not as clear as we might like) that her response “**How can this be...**” is not (unlike Zacharias) one of doubt but a response of amazement and wonder as to the means by which this will take place. This leads us to our second question.

And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

How Did This Happen?

How would Mary have a child since she has not known a man? We like to speak of the miracle of childbirth. As beautiful and wondrous as it is, it is not actually a miracle. God has ordered a universe where certain biological and physical things take place. And it is in the course of these natural affairs that people have babies.

Having said that, childbirth is a mysterious wonder. The wisest man who ever lived (other than Jesus) spoke of the wonder of the unborn baby and our inability to fully grasp it.

As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything (Ecclesiastes 11:5).

It is very common for people seeking to justify the killing of the baby in the womb, to speak as if they know things that they do not truly know. They will veil the dark deed with words like zygote, embryo or fetus, as if

human classifications can mitigate moral darkness. I wish I was joking when I say that some wish to add toddler to this list.

The Psalmist writes of the unique prerogative of God when it comes to the actions of the womb.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance (Psalm 139:15, 16).

We live in a world where people think that because they *see* how things work, they therefore *know* how things work. When it gets right down to it, the finest minds cannot answer the infinite regress of the 'why' questions. There are two 'why' questions that mere human wisdom is incapable of answering. One is why in terms of biological/physical function. The other is why in terms of purpose.

In terms of biological (or physics) we can generally answer a penultimate question. But if one keeps asking, we do get to the end of ourselves quite rapidly. As a child I asked my dad why grass was green. He answered 'chlorophyl.' I then asked why does chlorophyll turn grass green? Having reached the end of his acumen on photosynthesis, he gave one of the most theological accurate answers I ever learned from him, "Because God made it that way."

When it comes to the 'why' in terms of purpose, people will generally not as easily deceive themselves. The world will often admit they don't know why. For the Christian, the ultimate why is that God may be glorified.

When it comes to the virgin birth, the world is quick to ridicule. They just can't get their arms around how otherwise moderately intelligent people can believe that which is contrary to the biological systems we observe (even though they don't truly understand themselves).

R. C. Sproul had a humorous, yet profound response to the criticisms of the naturalist. He wrote:

Without the power of God, there can be no egg, there can be no sperm, there can be no life at all. The great miracle comes from the naturalist today who tells us that the world popped

into existence on its own power. That's the virgin birth of the whole universe.

So how did the virgin birth take place? The **"Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you."** The same verb *epenthontos* is used in Acts 1:8 where the Holy Spirit will come upon believers that they may be Christ's witnesses to the end of the earth.

It might be overly ambitious to try to get into the detailed mechanics of the means by which this event took place. Note that there are two things happening. One is that the Holy Spirit comes upon her, the other is power of the Highest will overshadow her.

It could be that the shadow, like Peter's shadow (Acts 5:15), was functioning in the miracle. Or, as Matthew Henry offered, the shadow was designed **"to conceal it [the miracle] from those that would too curiously observe the motions of it, and pry into the mystery of it."**²

As for me, I find no difficulty in believing that the God who spoke all things into being by the word of His mouth could create life in the womb of Mary. So often our thoughts of God are too small! Is this not the same Holy Spirit who **"was hovering over the face of the waters"** (Genesis 1:2) at creation? The conception was miraculous. As verse 37 will aptly state: **"For with God nothing will be impossible."**

Why Is the Virgin Birth Important?

Forgive me for treating so briefly, such an immense topic as to why the virgin birth is critical to the Christian faith. There are numerous answers, and I will touch some of them in a concise manner.

First, some argue that it was necessary that Jesus avoid the line of Adam that the curse of Adam would not reach Him. True, it is through Adam that "sin entered the world" (Romans 5:12), but the text of Scripture does not tell us that this was a reason for the virgin birth. The same problem could potentially exist since Jesus was born of the substance of Mary, which is why Roman Catholics insist on the Immaculate Conception (the sinless birth of Mary).

² Henry, M. (1994). [*Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume*](#) (p. 1823). Peabody: Hendrickson.

All of this becomes a bit speculative. Suffice it to say that the Holy Spirit can create a Holy Child who is free from the effects of sin. But the holiness of the child, though including sinlessness, goes far beyond sinlessness.

What we do see emphasized in this sacred event is that Jesus will be called **“the Son of God.”** Unlike us, He is not a son by adoption, but **“the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).** What we learned earlier is that it was this that was the great offense which was viewed as a capital crime.

The Jews [talking to Pilate] answered him, “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God” (John 19:7).

The prophecy from Isaiah says He will be called Immanuel, which means God with us. The emphasis of the birth of Christ-the great offense of the Gospel-is that God has entered into His own history and those living out that history do not desire His company.

When I lived in a dormitory in college, certain wings had an RA (resident attendant). They were often students, but they also worked for the university. Their job was to make sure things didn't get out of hand. The more ill-behaved the students, the less excited they were about having an RA in our wing.

The zenith of truth, love, beauty, holiness, power, wisdom, goodness was dropped into the pale of human darkness, and we do not like Him in our wing. Yet having Him in our wing is our only hope. Christ did not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (John 3:17).

Why is the virgin birth critical to our redemption? Because it is necessary to our redemption that we have a Mediator who is truly man (representing us) and truly God. Of course this shoots us into another non-negotiable doctrine of the Christian faith. In the interest of brevity, I will answer this via our catechism (though there is ample testimony in Scripture to buttress this).

Q. 38. *Why was it requisite that the mediator should be God?*

A. It was requisite that the mediator should be God, that he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God, and the power of death; give worth and efficacy to his sufferings, obedience, and intercession; and to satisfy God's justice, procure his favor, purchase a peculiar people, give his Spirit to them, conquer all their enemies, and bring them to everlasting salvation.

Q. 39. *Why was it requisite that the mediator should be man?*

A. It was requisite that the mediator should be man, that he might advance our nature, perform obedience to the law, suffer and make intercession for us in our nature, have a fellow-feeling of our infirmities; that we might receive the adoption of sons, and have comfort and access with boldness unto the throne of grace.

Q. 40. *Why was it requisite that the mediator should be God and man in one person?*

A. It was requisite that the mediator, who was to reconcile God and man, should himself be both God and man, and this in one person, that the proper works of each nature might be accepted of God for us, and relied on by us, as the works of the whole person.

Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. ³⁷ For with God nothing will be impossible." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her (Luke 1:36-38).

Mary's Response

Perhaps given as a source of sisterly encouragement, Mary is made known of the prior miracle of her cousin. It would be profitable for her to know that God does these sorts of things.

In conclusion, Mary, no doubt with the recognition that her immediate future would involve criticism, ridicule, heartache and physical pain, responds, "Let it be to me according to your word." One gets the feeling that the angel, quite satisfied with that answer, departs. May we all have a similar faithful acquiescence to the providence of God-that we might always, body and soul, place ourselves at the disposal of a God who is love and all wise.

Questions for Study

1. What criticisms have you heard of the virgin birth? How do you respond (pages 2-4)?
2. Was Mary truly a virgin (pages 5, 6)?
3. Why is the virgin birth a critical teaching (pages 5-9)?