

**“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”, Luke 1:26-28, BCF December 12, 2010**

*In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

*"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

*The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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. Even 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. For nothing is impossible with God."*

*"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.*

Secular history leaves us with the belief that the Caesars, the kings and the presidents shape the world. Most items considered newsworthy revolve around these powerful figures, as they demand front-page headlines. In 1809 the newspapers were captivated with stories about Napoleon Bonaparte's campaigns. International attention was focused on Napoleon marching across Austria, Napoleon invading Spain. Little else was news worthy, especially the birth of babies which were born that year. It seemed as though Napoleon was the only one shaping the destiny of the world.

Actually the world's destiny was being shaped in the cradles of the world. It was the year 1809 that William Gladstone was born and he was to become one of the greatest statesmen that England ever produced. Alfred Lloyd Tennyson was born that year to a poor minister and his wife; he was destined to shape the literary world. Oliver Wendell Holmes was born that same year in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Edgar Allen Poe began his tragic life that same year. Charles Darwin was born that year. I checked my family tree to see if one of my ancestors was born that year, but no luck. And a baby was born that same year in a log cabin in Hardin County Kentucky, and this scrap of conversation was recorded: "Any news down t' the village, Ezry?" "Well, Squire McLains's gone t' Washington t' see Madison swore in, and ol' Spellman tells me this Bonaparte fella has captured most o' Spain. What's new out here, neighbor?" "Nuthin', nuthin' a'tall, 'ceptfer a new baby born t' Tom Lincoln's. Nothin' ever happens out here." That is how insignificantly the birth of Abraham Lincoln was noted.

At the time these individuals were born their births were insignificant in the eyes of the world. After all the destiny of the world was being shaped by Napoleon on the battlefields of Austria.

In 4 BC Caesar August was one of the most powerful Caesars. It was said of him that he came to a Rome made of bricks and left it a city of marble. He transformed the world, not just Rome, but the entire known world with his roads and armies. Mourners at his funeral comforted themselves with the belief that he was a god and therefore immortal. They believed Caesar had shaped the world.

But in reality the destiny of the world was being shaped in an obscure town in a small outlying province of the mighty Roman Empire. You heard the story read to us just a few minutes ago: a story of a young girl in a small town who had an unexpected visitor. The girl's name was Mary, or

Miriam in Aramaic. We do not talk too much about her in our Protestant churches, most probably in reaction to our friends in the Catholic Church, who magnify her role to the point where Catholics offer prayers to her. However, because others have thought too much of Mary does not mean that we should think too little of her; we need to come to a Biblical view of her.

This message is part of our series “Q&A With Jesus”; our question today is not asked of Jesus, but is instead asked about him: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

So what can we learn from this story? Let us look at our text.

## 1. Mary's Position

*In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. We need to notice several things*

### a. *She lived in Nazareth.*

Why is this significant? Because Nazareth was a “nothing” sort of village; it is never mentioned in the Old Testament, and it was just a small agricultural village in Galilee, well away from Jerusalem, the center of Jewish power and authority. It was however on the Roman Road to Jerusalem, so Roman troops would be a common sight. Its streets would have been narrow. And its houses small and simple. Because of its position its inhabitants were most probably a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, and so it had a bad reputation among pious Jews. So when 30 or so years later Philip tries to get Nathaniel to meet Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel replies contemptuously (John 1:45-46) “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” So Mary came from a poor insignificant village.

### b. *She was a young and poor peasant girl*

Living in Nazareth as she did, Mary was most probably an illiterate peasant girl. We do not know much about her background. Early non-biblical writings name her parents as Joachim and Ann, but we do not know if they were still alive at the time of Gabriel's visit. Life expectancy in first century Judea was short, less than 40 years, so it is quite possible that Mary's parents were no longer alive. People got engaged to be married at a young age in those days, and it has been estimated that Mary was a young teenager, some think as young as 12 years old, with 14 years being the upper limit. So Mary was both young and uneducated.

### c. *She was a devout girl*

When Gabriel speaks to her he calls her “highly favored” and goes on to say “you have found favor with God”, so we can conclude that she was a devout and God-fearing girl. She would have been a regular attender at the synagogue, at least once she became old enough to do so, and no doubt learned her scriptures from her parents and the local rabbi, or teacher.

### d. *She was engaged to Joseph, a descendant of David*

According to Dr. Renald Showers of the Friends of Israel, the first major step in a Jewish marriage was betrothal, or engagement. This involved the establishment of a marriage covenant. The prospective bridegroom would travel from his father's house to the home of the prospective bride. There he would negotiate with the father of the young woman to determine the price that he must pay to purchase his bride. Once the bridegroom paid the purchase price, the marriage covenant was thereby established, and the young man and woman were regarded to be husband and wife. From

that moment on the bride was declared to be consecrated or sanctified, set apart exclusively for her bridegroom. As a symbol of the covenant relationship that had been established, the groom and bride would drink from a cup of wine over which a betrothal benediction had been pronounced. After the marriage covenant had been established, the groom would leave the home of the bride and return to his father's house. There he would remain separate from his bride for a period of twelve months. And Luke is careful to note that Joseph was a descendant of David, so any children of his marriage to Mary would also be descended from David.

So we learn from this that God is able to use – perhaps even delights to use – those who are in humble circumstances. He could have gone to Rome and chosen Julia the Younger, granddaughter of the emperor Caesar Augustus, who was about 16 years old at this time; he could have gone to Jerusalem and chosen the daughter of the High Priest; he could have gone to anyone....but He chose to go to a poor peasant girl in a remote and unknown village in Galilee and give her the greatest gift and the greatest challenge that any woman has had; to be the mother of Jesus. And why did he choose Mary? We are not told directly, but I think we can guess; she was humble, she was godly, and she was (as we shall see) obedient.

## **2. Mary's Powerful Visitor**

*In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

When God wants to do something big, He sends in His big gun, the archangel Gabriel. It was Gabriel who brought the news to Zechariah that his wife would have a son, and when Zechariah doubted he replied (Luke 1:19-20) "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

We do not know how Gabriel appeared to Mary; there are thousands of representations in paintings. And it is possible that Gabriel appeared in human form without any glowing nimbus of light. But however Gabriel appeared, it must have been a frightening appearance, because in spite of the words "*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.*", Mary was scared out of her wits.

## **3. Mary's Panic**

*"Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be."*

I think we can all empathize with Mary! Here she was, going about her daily tasks, perhaps even working on her trousseau for her wedding to Joseph, when suddenly she is confronted with this mighty angel. Small wonder that she was "greatly troubled". Gabriel this loses no time in bringing peace and a prophecy to her.

## **4. Mary's Peace and Prophecy**

*But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

a. *Gabriel assures Mary of God's blessing.* Gabriel's first words are "do not be afraid" He assures Mary that this visitation is not to bring judgment, but to announce God's favor and God's blessing on Mary. He says "*you have found favor with God.*" This is our scriptural evidence that Mary was a devout and godly young woman.

b. *Gabriel tells her that she will become pregnant and will have a son, and she is to name him Jesus.* The part about becoming pregnant is the part that perplexes Mary, since she was a virgin and had never slept with a man. In addition, she was betrothed to Joseph, which had the same force as marriage in Jewish eyes. So any pregnancy before her marriage would be a grave sin, equivalent to adultery, and thus punishable by death under the law of Moses. The name Jesus was less puzzling, since it was a common name at the time, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Joshua, which meant "Yahweh is salvation".

c. *Gabriel says "He will be great"*

This brings us to the crux of Gabriel's message. The child Mary is to bear will be no ordinary child. In the first place He will be great. That is because He was and is and always will be great, because He is the Son of God. John Piper says:

"Is there anything great in the world that excites you, that you go out of your way to see or hear? Christ made it! And he is ten million times greater in every respect, except sin. If you took all the greatest thinkers of every country and every century of the world and put them in a room with Jesus, they would shut their mouths and listen to the greatness of his wisdom. All the greatest generals would listen to his strategy. All the greatest musicians would listen to his music theory and his performance on every instrument. There is nothing that Jesus cannot do a thousand times better than the person you admire most in any area of human endeavor under the sun. Words fail to fill the greatness of Jesus."

d. *Gabriel goes on to say "He will be called the Son of the Most High"*

He will be called the Son of the Most High. This is just another term for the Son of God, as verse 35 makes clear "the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Jesus is God's Son because God is His father. As C. S. Lewis says, "When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds" (*Beyond Personality*, 1948, p. 5). And by analogy then when God begets or fathers Jesus, he begets God.

e. *And then he adds "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David"*

Next, the child will reign as a King "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David" This is a clear reference to the fact that the child would be the "anointed one", the Messiah, that devout Jews were waiting for an anticipating.

f. *Gabriel concludes by saying "and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

This is a wonderful promise, because it means that Jesus is just as much King now as He was when He ascended into heaven; He is ruling His people today just as much as Barack Obama or David Cameron or Vladimir Putin or any other world leader are governing, and He will continue to reign long after they are in their graves, and until He returns to establish his kingdom.

As John Piper says “If Gabriel has spoken the truth, *THE ISSUE* in 2010, no matter where you live on this planet, is: Will you bow before the kingship of Jesus and obey the rule of his kingdom?”

## **5. Mary’s Perplexity**

*“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”*

A very understandable question, since she had never slept with any man. It was not a disbelieving question, along the lines of Zechariah’s response to Gabriel six months earlier. You probably remember the story, how Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple and said that he would have a son. Zechariah then said, loosely paraphrased “I don’t believe you; both my wife and I are too old to have children” and got struck dumb for his disbelief. No, Mary’s question was more along the lines of “yes, I believe you, but I do not understand how it can happen, because I am a virgin.” So we see that Mary had great faith in what Gabriel was telling her, even though she did not understand the details.

## **6. Mary’s Proof**

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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. Even 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. For nothing is impossible with God."

*a. Gabriel explains how this will happen.*

The first verse is crucial to our understanding of who Jesus is. His birth was no ordinary birth, and His divine Sonship depends on his being born of a human mother and the Holy Spirit as His divine father. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. *So* (or therefore) the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Jesus is the Son of God precisely because God was his father through the miracle of the virgin birth.

*b. Gabriel gives supporting evidence*

God in His providence had provided a powerful example to Mary to strengthen her faith. Our passage begins “In the sixth month, God sent his angel Gabriel to Nazareth”, which prompts the question “sixth month of what?” And the answer is of course that it is the sixth month of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, and the wife of the still dumb Zechariah who had not believed Gabriel in the temple. And how gracious it was of God to provide this wonderful example of His miraculous power to Mary, so that she could have her faith strengthened in preparation for this great miracle that was to take place in her body.

*c. Gabriel clinches the argument*

“For nothing is impossible with God.” If you mark your Bible, this is one of the verses that you need to underline and put asterisks beside; it is one of those verses we can come back to when our world comes tumbling down. “For nothing is impossible with God.” It was our God who made light shine out of darkness and who hung the stars in space, it was our God who ordained the laws of physics so that we have a stable and habitable world, it was our God who called his people out of Egypt and brought them into the promised land. And it is this same God (2 Cor 4:6) who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," (who) made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

So Gabriel reminds Mary of God’s power, of His ability to work miracles, and he does so in a way that reminds Mary of another story of God’s power. As a pious Jewess, she would be familiar with

the story of Abraham and his wife Sarah, and how God promised that Sarah would have a son, and how Sarah overheard the conversation and laughed. And we read

(Gen 18:13-14) *Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."* So the angel's words would have brought back this story to Mary's mind, and it would have been another piece of evidence in the chain that brought her to her final words.

## **7. Mary's Profession of Faith**

*"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."* Then the angel left her. This is Mary's supreme act of faith; an immortal response. "I am the Lord's servant" she says, and just as a servant does not question her master, so Mary did not question God's request of her. No doubt she could have said no. After all, she must have realized that this would be a costly experience for her. How would her fiancé Joseph take the fact that his betrothed wife was pregnant? And what about the village gossips in Nazareth? And what about the law that adulterers and adulteresses should be stoned? Even though it was rarely carried out, the law was still on the books. Perhaps these thoughts and others rushed through her mind as she pondered this amazing statement by Gabriel. But if they did, they did not change her response. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." And it is because of this act obedient faith that we can rejoice today in the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

## **8. Mary's Perspective**

There is so much to learn from God's dealings with Mary, but three lessons stand out.

### *a. God delights to use humble people to do His work.*

Mary gives us a challenging picture of the person God uses. He does not need our education; He does not need our personality; He does not need our gifts; He does not need our money; He does not need our strength. He does need our hearts: and when He has our hearts, He has all He needs to use us for His glory. So never say to yourself "I am only a teenager"; God used a teenager to bring His Son into the world! Don't say "I am only an uneducated person"; God used an uneducated girl for His glory. Don't say "I am poor; I do not have much money to give"; God used a poor peasant girl to bring His greatest gift to the world. What matters to God is not what the world thinks of us; He does not care about our reputation, the size of our house, the make of our car, the size of our bank balance, or the number of degrees we have. He only cares about our hearts. When the Lord sent Samuel to the house of Jesse to anoint the next king of Israel, Jesse brought out his oldest son Eliab for Samuel, but God spoke to Samuel and said (1 Sam 16:7) "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

He can use you, whatever your gifts or finances or situation in life; are you willing to be used?

### *b. Mary is the perfect example of the person God uses.*

When Gabriel told her that she was going to have a son whose father would be God himself, she did not hesitate, but said "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Are we willing to give this response to God, when He comes to us with ways to serve Him? Do we trust God enough to say "I am your slave; take me; use your omnipotent power to put me *where* you want me, *when* you want me there, doing *what* you want me to do"?

Dr. Ralph Wilson writes “Every time I read Mary's response to the Angel's announcement and explanation, I am awed: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Here is a teenager facing misunderstanding and rejection from her family, her betrothed, and her townspeople. And yet she agrees. Mary affirms the bedrock truth that undergirds our discipleship: "I am the Lord's servant." After all is said and done, after we have explored all the possibilities, we still must decide: am I a servant or a master? Is my allegiance to the Lord or to my own desires?”

*c. Nothing is too hard for God*

Gabriel told Mary “Nothing is impossible with God” Do you believe that? This is not the same thing as saying “God will do whatever I want”, but it is the same as saying, “When God calls me to serve Him, I can leave the results to Him, because He is the one who will make it happen”

Let's live and speak so that men and women in Blacksburg and Barcelona and Bangladesh might know that Jesus Christ is a great Savior, the Son of the Most High, and the never-ending King of kings, and let us remember and give thanks for Mary and her part in the amazing event of the incarnation.