

## **“He Who Is Mighty Has Done Great Things” (Luke 1:26–56)**

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Our lives can change in a moment. A single phone call, email, or text message could give us news that would alter our lives forever. A chance encounter with someone could do the same thing.

Have you ever noticed that many movies begin with an average person who gets caught up in some kind of intrigue? Perhaps the person witnesses a murder and then becomes a target for the bad guys. Or maybe the person meets a superhero or an alien. That’s what happened when Elliott met E.T., or when Jonathan and Martha Kent found the infant Kal-El, otherwise known as Superman.

Today, we’re going to look at a story of a very average young woman, perhaps a teenage girl, who is visited by an extraordinary being. She is given news that not only changes her life, but also changes the whole world. Of course, I’m talking about the virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Last week, we began reading the Gospel of Luke together. We saw that Luke begins his history by saying that while others had compiled narratives regarding Jesus, he saw fit to write an “orderly account” of what God had done. He says that his account is based on eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:1–4).

Luke begins his story with an old priest and his wife, who was barren. While Zechariah is serving in the temple in Jerusalem, the angel Gabriel tells him that his wife will have a child named John, who will turn people to God. John the Baptist will tell people to get ready for the coming King of Israel, the Messiah.

This week, we learn that Elizabeth’s relative, Mary, also receives news from the angel Gabriel. But her news is even more unbelievable. In Elizabeth’s case, her pregnancy was a miracle because she was past child-bearing age and had previously been unable to have children. But Elizabeth still conceived in the usual way. However, Mary’s pregnancy is more miraculous, because she had never “known” a man before.

Let’s find out what happens to Mary and how she reacts. We’ll do that by reading Luke 1:26–33:

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" <sup>29</sup> But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."<sup>1</sup>

In last week's passage, we found out that Mary's relative, Elizabeth, had become pregnant and had hidden her pregnancy for five months. It is now the sixth month of her pregnancy. The same angel, Gabriel, comes to Mary, who lived in a small city called Nazareth, which was at least 65 miles north of Jerusalem, where Gabriel had appeared to Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah. Put it this way: if Jerusalem was Boston, Nazareth was Oakham. What, you've never heard of Oakham? I had never heard of it until yesterday, when I looked on a map and found that it's about 65 miles west of Boston. The point is that Nazareth was Nowheresville.

And Mary wasn't anyone particularly special. She was a virgin, probably still a teenager, and betrothed to a man named Joseph, who just happened to be of the tribe of Judah and the house of David. Being betrothed to someone was similar to being engaged, but much more serious. When a man was betrothed to a woman, he would pay the father of the woman a bride price, there would be witnesses, and the man would be known as the woman's husband. Yet the marriage ceremony and the consummation of the marriage would come about a year later. In order to break off a betrothal, there needed to be a divorce. The point is that Mary was betrothed to Joseph but they were not married and had not consummated their relationship.

One day, this ordinary young woman was visited by an extraordinary being, an archangel. I say that Mary is "ordinary" because there is no indication in this passage or in the whole Bible that she is anything other than a normal person. This is one place where Roman Catholics and Protestants part ways. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Mary had an "Immaculate Conception" that made her free from all sin. Strangely, this didn't become official Catholic doctrine until 1854, when Pope Pius IX declared:

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

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>

The Catholic Church also teaches, “By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long.”<sup>3</sup> However, there isn’t even a hint of this in the Bible. Instead, Gabriel says that Mary is “favored” or “graced.” She has been a recipient of God’s grace, but that doesn’t mean she was sinless. In fact, the Bible is quite clear that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). All, except for Jesus. What makes Jesus so special is that he alone didn’t sin.

I said this last week, but it bears repeating: God made a good world that became corrupted by sin when the first human beings turned away from him. When that happened, sin entered into the world. Sin is more than just bad choices. Sin is a power that has deep roots within each one of us. It distorts our desires. We were made to know, love, and worship God. But our sinful nature causes us to love everything but God. Instead of making God the center of lives, we make something else—something inferior—our objects of worship. We find our comfort, safety, pleasure security, meaning, and hope in something other than God. That is why God sent a Savior, his Son, to rescue us. There is no indication in the Bible that Mary was any different than you and me in that regard. She needed a Savior just as much as we do.

But Mary “found favor,” or grace, with God. The same is said of Noah (Gen. 6:8), and we have no reason to believe Noah was sinless. But Mary, like Noah, was chosen for a special purpose. Gabriel says she will conceive and bear a son named Jesus. We’re not absolutely sure, but the name Jesus may mean “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation.”<sup>4</sup> At any rate, Gabriel says he will be great and will be called “son of the Most High.” In other words, this child Jesus is the Son of God.

Gabriel also says that Jesus will inherit the throne of David, the premiere King of Israel, who lived about a thousand years earlier. God told David that he would have a son who would reign forever (2 Sam. 7:12–13). The prophets promised that this offspring of David would be the

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Pius IX taught this doctrine in his encyclical, *Ineffabilis Deus*, dated December 8, 1854. The entire encyclical can be read at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9ineff.htm> (accessed December 18, 2014). See also Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed., §491 (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 124.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §493, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 129–130.

perfect king, reigning with “peace . . . justice and . . . righteousness.” But not only that, he would be called “Mighty God” and “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6–7).

For those of us who are familiar with the Bible, we get so used to this message that we tend to forget how truly awesome it is. Imagine that you live in Nowheresville and you’re a Miss Nobody, and you’re told that your child will be the Son of God and a king who reigns forever. Forever is a long time. How can a mere human being reign forever? How can a mere human being also be called the Son of God? How could anyone believe such news?

Mary didn’t seem to doubt that this could be true. She might not have fully realized that this child would also be God, that, somehow, the eternal Son of God could be joined to a human nature. But she had a question. She wondered how she could have a child when she was just a virgin. So, Gabriel tells her. Let’s read verses 34–38:

<sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

<sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.” <sup>38</sup> 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.

Mary literally says, “How will this be, since I don’t know a man?” She knows that in order to have children, a woman has to “know” a man sexually. Since she hasn’t known a man to this point, she’s wondering how she can have this special child. Will this child come from Joseph?

Gabriel gives her the answer. The Holy Spirit will “come upon” her. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity, along with the Father and the Son. I hate to say this, but in our sex-obsessed culture, I must: There is no hint here of the Holy Spirit having sex with Mary, though there are myths in the ancient world of gods having those kinds of relationships with women. There is no hint of such strange things in the Bible, and the Holy Spirit is immaterial, having no body. However, the idea of the power of God “overshadowing” is present in Scripture. That Greek verb is used in the translation of the Old Testament when the glory cloud “settled” on the tabernacle (Exod. 40:35). The idea also reminds us of the beginning of the Bible. The Bible famously begins with these words: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Then there is the second verse: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness

was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” Mary’s womb, we might say, was “void,” until the Spirit of God “hovered” over it and caused life to emerge. Jesus is a new creation. The first creation was spoiled by sin, but Jesus will be unspoiled by sin. He will be holy, not because Mary was first unstained by sin. No, the reason why Jesus is holy is because he has a supernatural conception. This breaks the power of sin that has been passed on from generation to generation. This is the true miraculous conception. Without having sex, Mary became pregnant because of the power of the Holy Spirit.

People find this hard to believe. Are we really supposed to believe that a virgin could become pregnant? I gave a more thorough defense of the virgin birth three years ago in a sermon called “Jesus Was Born of a Virgin.” You can find that on our website under the sermon series, “Who Is Jesus?”<sup>5</sup> I would encourage you to listen to that sermon or read it to find out more. But if you’re wondering why something like this should be believed, let me ask you, how did the universe get here? The best mainstream science suggests that the universe began at one point in time. All matter, energy, space, and even time itself have a beginning. How did this come about? Many atheists try to dodge the question of the origin of the universe by suggesting that this universe is part of an endless cycle of universes being born and dying, but that just pushes the question further back. If that were true—and we have no evidence that it is—who or what sustains that cycle? Others posit the so-called “multiverse theory,” that our universe just happens to be one of countless parallel universes. But who created them? At least Tufts University professor Daniel Dennett was honest enough to make the claim that the universe “perform[s] a version of the ultimate bootstrapping trick; it creates itself *ex nihilo* [out of nothing]. Or at any rate out of something that is well-nigh indistinguishable from nothing at all.”<sup>6</sup>

So, which claim is more reasonable, that the impersonal, material universe created itself, or that a personal, all-powerful, eternal, immaterial God created a material universe out of nothing? And if God can create a whole universe out of nothing, what is creating a baby out of a virgin?

Let’s just say we believe the universe did create itself out of nothing, or that it’s always been around in some form or another, and that’s just the way it is. What about the origin of life?

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<sup>5</sup> “Jesus Was Born of a Virgin,” December 21, 2014, <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), 244, quoted in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 151.

We now know that even simple life forms are incredibly complex. The simple single-celled organism, with its DNA and molecular machines, is spectacularly complex. What accounts for this?

In the movie *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, Ben Stein interviews two atheists. One is Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science and a former professor at Florida State University. Stein (perhaps best known as the teacher who keeps saying “Bueller? Bueller?” in the movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*) asks Ruse how life emerged from an inorganic world. Ruse says one popular theory is that life emerged “on the backs of crystals.”<sup>7</sup> Richard Dawkins, another atheist and an evolutionary biologist, believes that life on earth could have been “seeded” by a “higher intelligence” from somewhere else in the universe. In other words, aliens could have planted life here.<sup>8</sup> Seriously. He doesn’t say how alien life started, so this again pushes the question back further. What is more believable? That a highly intelligent, all-powerful God designed life, that life emerged by chance “on the backs of crystals,” or that aliens—whom we have never seen and whose existence requires its own explanation—planted life on earth?

Yes, it may be hard to believe that a virgin could conceive, but I think it’s harder to believe that this universe could come from nothing or that life, with all its rich complexity, could emerge from some unintelligent, unguided process, or through the actions of ALF or E.T. If God can create a universe out of nothing and life where there was none, he can cause a virgin to become pregnant.

Perhaps the virgin birth isn’t the biggest miracle. Just yesterday I happened to read some of Martin Luther’s words on Mary. According to Luther, Bernard of Clairvaux said that there were three miracles in this passage. Luther writes, “Saint Bernard declared there are here three miracles: that God and man should be joined in this child; that a mother should remain a virgin; that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her.” Then, Luther adds, “The last is not the least of the three. The virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that God should become man is a greater miracle; but most amazing of all is that this maiden should credit the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen to be the mother of God.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> You can view this exchange at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOPkXFTd5Rs>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOPkXFTd5Rs>.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, “The Maiden Mary,” in *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus: Experiencing the Peace and Promise of Christmas* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 26.

What's amazing about Mary is that not that she was sinless or remained a virgin for her whole life. Neither of these things are true. What is amazing is that she believes. After she hears this news, she says the famous words that would inspire the Beatles: "let it be." She says, "let it be to me according to your word." Mary is a model of faith, a model of submitting to God's plans for her life.

After the angel speaks to her, Mary goes to her relative, Elizabeth. Gabriel had told Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant; perhaps Mary wanted to see that this was true. Elizabeth and Zechariah lived somewhere south of Jerusalem, some 80–100 miles away from Nazareth. This was no small trip for someone who would have to walk. Let's read verses 39–45:

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, <sup>40</sup> and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, <sup>42</sup> and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup> And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Elizabeth is pregnant, with John the Baptist in her womb. And when Elizabeth greets Mary, John leaps. John's role is to point to Jesus, and he even does this before he is born. The Bible consistently shows that the unborn are human beings.

Elizabeth, like John, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she says that Mary is blessed. Elizabeth also says that Mary's child is blessed, and she wonders why "the mother of my Lord should come to" her. Elizabeth calls Mary's baby "my Lord." What a strange thing to say of an unborn baby! By my count, the word "Lord" is used twenty-seven times in the first two chapters of Luke. In the other twenty-six times, the word clearly refers to God. I think this is a hint that Elizabeth somehow knew this unborn child was not just the Messiah, an anointed king, but also God. Elizabeth also says that Mary is blessed because she "believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Mary is blessed to be chosen as the mother of Jesus, and she is blessed that she believed.

I have to add the following as evidence that Mary is not a sinless superwoman. Later in the Gospel of Luke, a woman in a crowd says to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!" (Luke 11:27). Now, this would be the perfect time for Jesus to

say, “Yes, my mother is blessed because she is full of grace, immaculately conceived, without sin, and still a virgin!” But does he say that, or anything like it? No. He says, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep” (Luke 11:28). Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus is told his mother and brothers are waiting to see him (Luke 8:19–20). Jesus says, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21).

The point is that Mary believed God’s word and responded in faith, and that is what makes her blessed. And those who respond today to God’s word are blessed. We would do well to follow Mary’s lead.

Mary’s responds to Elizabeth’s blessing with a song, often called the Magnificat, after the Latin translation of the first word in Greek, “magnifies.” Mary probably didn’t break out into singing, but somewhere along the line her words were put into a poem. This happens often in the Bible. Truth can be expressed in verbatim reporting, but the essence of truth can often be captured in artistic form, in a poem, a song, a painting.

Let’s read verses 46–56:

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,  
  
<sup>47</sup> “My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>48</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.  
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> And his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
<sup>52</sup> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

<sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

We can break Mary’s song down into three parts. First, she praises God for what he has done for her. She says she “rejoices in God my Savior,” which shows that she, too, needed



salvation. She realizes that she is of “humble estate.” God has a way of choosing the unlikely, the nobodies, to do his will. He who is mighty has done great things for Mary, just as he has done great things for all who put their trust in him.

Second, Mary praised God more broadly for how he turns the tables. He scatters the proud and brings down the mighty from their positions of power. Yet he exalts the humble and fills the hungry with good things.

Third, Mary praises God for helping Israel. God keeps his promises. He had promised Abraham, the father of all the Israelites, that he would bless the world through his offspring. Mary realizes that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises to Israel. Jesus is the true offspring of Abraham. Jesus is the only one who kept the law given to Israel at Mount Sinai. Jesus is the true King, the Son of David who will reign forever.

Now that we’ve gone through this passage, we need to ask ourselves what it teaches us and how we can live in light of it.

First, this passage teaches us that salvation cannot be achieved except through supernatural intervention. Salvation cannot be achieved apart from a miracle. Salvation cannot be achieved apart from God coming to us. I realize that some people mock the idea of miracles. Some people think God doesn’t answer prayers. Some people think there is no God at all. But if there is no God who can intervene in our lives, there is no hope. There is no life after death. There is no hope that the world will be restored so that the curse of death is reversed. There is no hope that the brokenness of this world, including the brokenness in our bodies, minds, and hearts, can be healed and made whole.

Salvation from a world of death, from our own sin, and from God’s just and right judgment of that sin can only be found in Jesus. When Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb, he was the beginning of a new creation. As the Son of God, he has always existed, but when he became Jesus, he added a human nature and became the God-man. He is the bridge between heaven and earth, between God and us.

This message humbles us, because it says we can’t save ourselves. The only way to be made right with God is for God to come to us. Pastor Tim Keller says this:

Christmas is the end of thinking you are better than someone else, because Christmas is telling you that you could never get to heaven on your own. God had to come to you. It is telling you that people who are saved are not those who have

arisen through their own ability to be what God wants them to be. Salvation comes to those who are willing to admit how weak they are.<sup>10</sup>

The second thing this passage teaches us is that God humbles the proud and exalts the humble. Those who exalt themselves, who try to make themselves look great, will fall. Think of those atheists who reject the evidence that points to a Creator. They end up looking foolish, talking about crystals and aliens. But those who humble themselves and accept God's offer of salvation will be made great. Jesus is the perfect example of that. Though he was and is God, he humbled himself to become a lowly human being, born to a very humble woman. He was raised a carpenter's son in Nowheresville and lived a humble life. And he died a humiliating death when he was crucified. He was viewed as the scum of the earth. But after he died, he rose from the grave and is now exalted in heaven. Even though the world doesn't see it, Jesus is King. He reigns forever. Will you humble yourself and come under his reign? Does Jesus rule over your life?

God still causes the proud to stumble. God still cares about the humble and the weak. Many people who have been power and powerless have found great hope in this message. They trust that one day they will be exalted because they have believed.

The third thing this teaches is the nature of faith. Mary is a wonderful example. We shouldn't make too much of Mary. The story really isn't about her. But she is a model of faith. She hears God's message and she believes it. She says, "Do what you will. I am your humble servant. Let it be your will, not mine." That is what true faith looks like. Faith trusts. Faith submits. Faith acts. If we have the faith of Mary, we are just as blessed as Mary. Mary realized that God had come to hijack her life, to take it over, and she agreed. Do we have that attitude? If we do, we are blessed. Jonathan Edwards, the famous Massachusetts pastor and theologian, once said, "'Tis more blessed to have Christ in the heart than in the womb. 'Tis more blessed to have Christ in the arms of faith and love than in the arms or at the breast as the virgin Mary had."<sup>11</sup> You can have Jesus living in you through faith.

The fourth thing this passage teaches is that God doesn't always act in flashy ways. Think about the differences between how God spoke to Zechariah and Mary. Zechariah was an old

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Keller, "The Gifts of Christmas," in *Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "To Be More Blessed Than Mary," in *Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 59.

man, a man of status. Mary was a young woman. Zechariah was a priest. Mary had no position. Zechariah was in the big city of Jerusalem. Mary was in the small town of Nazareth. Zechariah's son, John, was filled with the Holy Spirit even in the womb. But Jesus, Mary's son, was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Zechariah and Elizabeth were said to be righteous, obeying the law. Yet Mary is a recipient of God's grace. By the standards of Jewish people, Zechariah had greater standing, and there was nowhere that God was more present than in the temple in Jerusalem. But God is not limited. He doesn't act only in big cities and in impressive cathedrals.

When God comes to us, it might be in small ways. It might start by hearing a sermon, or reading a passage in the Bible. It might start through a prayer. We might not feel anything. But God works through humble people and God often begins something big by starting with something small. Salvation is a miracle. Faith is a miracle. Faith often starts with a small realization that this message about God is true. Faith starts with small acts of trust. And if you want that miracle of salvation, ask God for it. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, you can be forgiven of your sins against God. Jesus came to seek and save lost rebels against God like you and me. He died to pay for the sins of the worst criminals, if they would turn to him in faith. Do you want to start anew, to be a new creation? Ask God for it. "For nothing will be impossible with God."