

January 3 Lesson

Today we read about the Annunciation—the announcement to Mary of Nazareth that she would be the mother of Jesus. So, last time, we read how God enabled Elizabeth to conceive a child in her old age, and she hid herself for five months. And now, in the sixth month of her pregnancy, Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee called Nazareth.

Now, the region of Galilee in Jesus' time was an area of land west of the Sea of Galilee, mainly in the territory of the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, but it also included small parts of Issachar and Asher. Galilee is very important in the story of Jesus: he grew up there, his ministry was headquartered there, many of his disciples were from Galilee, he performed most of his miracles there, and of his 32 parables, 19 were spoken in Galilee. The first three gospels are largely concerned with Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and most of the events of his life are set against the backdrop of the Galilean hills.

Many of the cities you know from Jesus' life are found in Galilee: Cana (first miracle), Nain (raised widow's son from the dead), Gennesaret, Magdala, Capernaum, Korazin, Bethsaida, and of course, Nazareth. Nazareth was located about 16 miles to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee. It was built on top of a hill, and, as you know, the people tried to throw Jesus off a nearby cliff. The town itself seems to have been small and secluded, even though it wasn't far from some of the key trade routes. From what we can tell, Nazareth didn't have a good reputation and was looked on with scorn; Nathanael, who was from nearby Cana, asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

And so, it was to a small, backward town in Galilee that Gabriel came with a message of good news. He came to a virgin called Mary, who was betrothed to Joseph, of the house of David. Now it's very important that we understand that Mary was truly a virgin, for you cannot deny the virgin birth of Jesus and be a Christian. The virgin birth of Christ is an essential Christian belief. It's part of a body of truths that are called "orthodoxy" (from the Greek *orthos* meaning "straight" and *doxa* meaning "belief or doctrine"). These are the most important truths of Christianity, and represent the consensual conclusions of the Christian Church.

Now, before we continue, let me make one clarification: by virgin birth we mean "virgin conception." In other words, Jesus' conception in the womb of Mary was not the result of sexual intercourse, it was the result of the work of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). However, Mary remained a virgin until Jesus was born (Matt 1:25), and so we say virgin birth to indicate that Mary retained her virginity from conception to birth. (Also, virgin birth does not mean that Jesus' didn't have a normal birth; Jesus *was* born in the normal fashion.)

OK, so how do we know that Mary was a virgin? Well, when Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive a child, Mary said, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (NKJV). I cite the NKJV here because it reflects the wording of the Greek. Mary used the word "know" as a figure for sexual relations. Mary understood Gabriel to be saying that her pregnancy was imminent, and she didn't understand how that could happen since she wasn't physically intimate with anyone. So, Mary claimed to be a virgin, and Gabriel's response to her question shows that he believed her. She was telling the truth.

Gabriel told Mary that her pregnancy would be the result, not of physical intercourse, but of the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit: "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). Jesus' conception would be the work of God alone, ensuring Mary's virginity until Jesus' birth. Matthew confirms Gabriel's statement when he says, "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:18). So, Scripture is clear—Mary was a virgin, and Jesus' conception was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now you might wonder why I didn't start with Isaiah 7:14 which says, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." The reason is that the Hebrew word for "virgin" simply means "young woman," not necessarily a virgin. Because of this, it is best to begin with Luke, establish that Mary was indeed a virgin, and then let Matthew assure us that "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (Matt 1:22).

OK, so we've established that Mary was indeed a virgin and that Jesus' conception was the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Now it's time to ask—so what? Why is the virgin birth so important? Well, the virgin birth is an essential truth in several ways:

(1) It is essential to a proper understanding of the person of Jesus. Let's think about this... When Jesus was conceived, did a new person come into existence? No! When Jesus was conceived, an eternal, preexistent person, the second person of the Trinity, took on humanity, flesh and blood, our human nature. Jesus is Emmanuel: God-with-us (Matt 1:23). He is the God-man, truly God and truly man, two distinct natures in one Person.

But how can this be? How can the divine Son of God become flesh, a union of full deity and full humanity? Well, one possibility is that God could have created a physical body out of the earth, just like he did with Adam, and then joined his Son with that body. But then what about the promises that the Messiah would be a son of David? (2 Sam 7:12–16; Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5–6). And how could Jesus truly be our High Priest if he wasn't physically descended from Adam? (Heb 2:14–18). Another possibility is that God could have taken the natural child of Mary and Joseph and joined his Son with that child. But then how could Jesus be the sacrifice for sin, for it would have been the human person of Jesus who died on the cross? Indeed, the idea that Jesus was actually two persons, one divine and one human, is called Nestorianism, and it was condemned by the church as heresy.

So we're back to our original question—how could the divine Son of God become flesh? A virgin conception is the only answer. Within Mary, the Holy Spirit miraculously added a complete human nature to the eternal, preexistent, divine person of the Son. He was conceived and born as one of us, truly man, yet truly God. The incarnation is indeed a wondrous truth! Why would the Son do this? Why would he condescend to come and die on a cross? Because he loved us! Amazing love! How can it be, that thou, my God, shouldst die for me? So, the virgin birth is essential to a proper understanding of the person of Jesus.

(2) It is essential to the moral character of Jesus. In the OT, the animals sacrificed for atonement for sin had to be without defect (Lev 1:3; 4:3; 6:6; etc., see 22:17–25; Mal 1:8). They couldn't be blind or maimed or have a running sore; they had to be without blemish. Why? Because the perfection of their physical bodies pointed to the spiritual perfection of the coming Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). And indeed, the apostles of Jesus, those who knew Him best, declared Him to be free of sin. He "committed no sin," says Peter (1 Pet 2:22). "In Him there is no sin," says John (1 John 3:5). He "knew no sin," says Paul (2 Cor 5:21), repeating their testimony.

How can this be? The Bible is clear that, "None is righteous, no, not one" (Rom 3:10). All who are born are affected by Adam's sin, for all were "in Adam" when he sinned (1 Cor 15:22). Ah, but *Jesus was not in Adam when he sinned*, for Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, uncreated and eternal, and thus he is not affected by Adam's sin. At conception, the Son of God took on our human nature, enabling Jesus to be sinless and yet still be a descendant of Adam and qualified to be our High Priest.

But wait—didn't Jesus receive his human nature from Mary? Wouldn't Jesus be affected by the corruption of the human nature, the depravity that comes to all men because of Adam's sin? Ah, but the corruption of the human nature is caused by a deprivation, that is, *a lack of a right relationship with God*. When we are conceived, we are separated from God and spiritually dead, and so turned in on ourselves. But Jesus

is God. What we lack, he is. When the human nature from Mary was added to Jesus, it received from him all that it lacked, and, in him, our human nature was restored to its original state. That is why Jesus is called the “last Adam” (1 Cor 15:45). Jesus is righteous, Jesus is holy, Jesus is sinless, and he is able to ransom us with his precious blood, “like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet 1:18–19). So, the virgin birth is essential to the moral character of Jesus.

Let me quickly add two other reasons why the virgin birth is so important: (3) It refutes those who say that Jesus’ birth was illegitimate. During Jesus’ ministry, we have two references which suggest that this slander was already present. Consider Mark 6:3 where the people from his hometown of Nazareth call him, not the son of Joseph, but the son of Mary. Also, John 8:41 where the Jews angrily say, “We were not born of sexual immorality”—a retort that was likely meant as a taunt. Now, although we can’t prove that these references are definite examples of slander, we do know that in the second and third centuries, the claim began to be circulated that Jesus was the son of Mary and a Roman soldier. The early Christians refuted these charges by pointing to the record in Luke and Matthew that Jesus’ conception was not illegitimate—it was supernatural.

(4) The truthfulness of Scripture depends on it. In his prologue, Luke claims that he “followed all things closely” that Theophilus might “have certainty” concerning the things he had been taught. Luke then tells about the unusual birth of John the Baptist and the virginal conception of Jesus. Everything that follows depends on the truthfulness of these accounts. If Luke is wrong about this, if he is mistaken about something so crucial, then what confidence can we have in the rest of his record? The truth of the virgin birth is directly related to the trustworthiness of the Holy Scriptures.

In closing, I want us to think about the amazing humility of Jesus, who was willing to lower himself to become flesh. Paul said, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:5–8). The incarnation is a lesson in self-denial, and when Jesus later called on his disciples to deny themselves, he was asking no more of them than he himself had done.

Kevin Bauder said: “Here is the true spirit of Christmas. Paul tells us that we are to think like Jesus thought. We are to adopt His mindset (Phil 2:5). If so, then Christmas is about denying ourselves, refusing to insist upon the privileges to which we may have a right. Christmas is about emptying ourselves, submitting to God, and identifying with those who need Him. Christmas is about humbling ourselves and sacrificing in behalf of those who still reject what is good and true and beautiful. Christmas is about doing all of this because sin has twisted and distorted people who must someday stand before God, and the gospel has the power to cleanse them and to transform them into the very image of Christ Himself.”