

THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS
(SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2018)

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 1:26-56

INTRODUCTION

I want to focus on the **wonder** of Christmas, the wonder of the incarnation and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wonder - a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable. This word comes to us in English from German.¹

Psa. 105:2 Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His **wondrous** works!

Psa. 145:5 I will meditate on the glorious splendor of Your majesty, And on Your **wondrous** works.

God's plan of salvation is very clear.

It is not a mystery how God saves sinners through Jesus Christ.

But this clarity does not mean that we don't still marvel at how God chose to redeem sinners through the coming of Jesus Christ.

None of what we are looking at today is new.

Some of you probably have read or heard this story 100 times or more.

But it is good to talk of all the wondrous works of God.

We do this to inspire our praise of God and so that we will be encouraged to continue to trust in God and His working of grace.

With God nothing shall be impossible.

Let us never limit God's power or greatness,

We will look at Luke 1:26-56 in three parts.

¹ New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. wonder.

1. ANNUNCIATION TO MARY - LUKE 1:26-38

J. Gresham Machen in his excellent book *The Virgin Birth of Christ* states that there are **sixteen** parts to the account of Christ's incarnation and birth as found in Matthew and Luke.²

Could *you* summarize the entire story as given in Luke and Matthew?

The story of Christ's incarnation and birth begins in Luke 1. After Luke's introduction in the opening verses, he records the visit of Gabriel to Zacharias announcing the coming birth of John the Baptist.

The second part of the account of Christ's incarnation and birth is the visit of Gabriel to Mary, in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Gabriel, the angel we first read about in the book of Daniel, was sent by God to Mary, who was already betrothed to Joseph.

Mary was living in the city of Nazareth in the area of Galilee. Nazareth was a very lowly, even a despised place. It was far from the center of power in Jerusalem.

And notice that two times in verse 27, Luke identifies Mary as being a virgin.

There is both a comparison and a contrast here with Elizabeth, who was barren.³

In fact, Gabriel's appearance to Mary shares at least 9 similarities with his appearance to Zacharias.⁴

This account is all so glorious to consider.

One thing that is interesting to ask is did Mary know that Gabriel was an angel? Did she believe him to be just another person or know that this was the great angel Gabriel?

This we are not told.

² J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 197.

³ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, vol. 35A of Word Biblical Commentary. Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 49.

⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 83.

Gabriel did not announce to Mary, "I am Gabriel the great angel from the book of Daniel." Rather Gabriel declared to Mary, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women."

You can understand, very well, why Mary was troubled or perplexed.

What was going on?

Maybe Mary started at this point to realize her visitor was no ordinary person.

Gabriel told Mary not to fear. She has found favor with God.

Does this statement remind you of something from the OT?

Where do we read something almost identical to this in Genesis?

Gen. 6:8 But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

In verse 31, Gabriel announced to Mary the great work that God would do in her. **Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son and shall call His name Jesus.**

Does this verse remind you of another verse? The language here is similar to Isaiah 7:14.

Now at this point, we are not yet told what will be so wonderful about this, but we should carefully consider the language of this verse. Mary would conceive a child. She would become pregnant.

We don't worship Mary as is essentially the case in the Roman Catholic Church.

Attempts have been made by many to declare Mary a co-Mediator and even a co-Redeemer of Christ. Mary we are told is almost better to pray to than Jesus.

Blasphemous!

But rightfully we see that Mary was given perhaps the greatest calling of any of God's people - to be the earthly means that God used in bringing about the incarnation.

Mary carried in her womb the God-man.

We have to be careful as we think of the natures of Christ. It can be easy to fall into error. There has been much controversy over the years. We have to carefully follow what Scripture has revealed to us.

It is all an incredible wonder!

We should note the important words of verse 32 and 33 concerning our Lord Jesus.

He is the Son of the Most High – that is the Son of God. The Lord God was to give to Him the throne of David. Jesus was the rightful heir to David’s throne.

Rushdoony has written concerning these verses:

“At this point, churchmen hasten to tell us that this throne and kingdom are spiritual and have no reference to this world, except insofar as men are saved and enter the ark of the church. That the meaning includes a spiritual and an eternal frame of reference can be fully granted, and must be. But there is no ground for the exclusion of a reference to time and history. Plainly, Jesus Christ shall be lord and sovereign of the nations in terms of messianic prophecy. He comes to reclaim His realm, His property, as sovereign Lord.”⁵

“The earth is the property of Jesus Christ, because He is the messianic King, the very Son of God as well as the royal son of David.”⁶

What is unique is found in verses 34 and 35.

Mary asked the right question in verse 34. It is not an expression of doubt. **How can this be, since I do not know a man?**

The great answer to this question is found in verse 35.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

This language should remind you of the words of Jesus to His disciples in Acts 1:8.

Acts 1:8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

The language is also similar to Isaiah 32:15.⁷

Isaiah 32:15 “Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, And the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, And the fruitful field is counted as a forest.”

⁵ Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, 493.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 494.

⁷ Nolland, 54.

Though the language is not identical, I think we should also think of the work of the Holy Spirit as portrayed in Genesis 1.

I think it is very important to realize that the account of the Virgin Birth as told in Matthew and Luke is told in such a way as to unify the word of God.

The Virgin Birth is a doctrine that connects with the entirety of God's great plan of redemption.

Continuing in verse 35 we read, **and the power of the Highest will overshadow you.**

Can you think of another place in Scripture where the verb overshadowed is used?

The verb **overshadow** is the same verb used in the Transfiguration account in Matthew 17:5.

We also should think back to the Old Testament and the presence of God filling the tabernacle at the end of the book of Exodus (40:35).

Therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.

This last part of verse 35 states what is the main purpose of the Virgin Birth.

This is the way that God chose so that the Eternal Word might take on human flesh.

Before we move on, let us look at verse 37, **For with God nothing will be impossible.**

Jer. 32:17 " Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You.

Some commentators have suggested that verse 37 is not so much apologetic, that is a proof of God's power, but a call for Mary to believe.⁸

But can't it be both?

Mary did need to trust in God's Sovereign power knowing that God can accomplish that which is humanly impossible.

This wonderful account of the Virgin Birth is given for your encouragement. **There is no reason to doubt God's continued working for His glory and your good.**

Let us consider Mary's response:

⁸ Hagner, 57.

“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”

Mary called herself a slave woman. This was not a boast but a humble recognition of her position before the Lord. Yes, she was given an incredible privilege – one that was also a test of faith. Let it be to me according to your word!⁹

The celebration of the birth of Christ calls for humility and trust in God’s power!

John MacArthur notes:

Mary was in an extremely embarrassing and difficult position. Betrothed to Joseph, she faced the stigma of unwed motherhood. Joseph would obviously have known that the child was not his. She knew she would be accused of adultery – an offense punishable by stoning (Dt 22:13–21; cf. Jn 8:3–5). Yet she willingly and graciously submitted to the will of God.¹⁰

Now what happens in between verses 38 and 39? It is not directly recorded in Scripture, but we know that it took place.

In between verse 38 and 39 we have the incarnation.

After the appearance of Gabriel and before Mary left to be with her cousin, the events that Gabriel announced took place.

The Holy Spirit came upon Mary, the power of the Highest overshadowed her, and Mary, a virgin, became pregnant, carrying now in her womb the God-man.

Isn’t this so amazing to consider and rejoice in!

2. VISIT OF MARY TO ELIZABETH - LUKE 1:39-45

We don’t know how much Joseph and Mary were in contact with each other. Matthew’s gospel focuses on Joseph’s part in this amazing story.

⁹ Joel Green notes that in antiquity the status of a slave was determined by the status of the householder. Green, 92.

¹⁰ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), paragraph 19331.

But not long after Gabriel's visit to Mary, Mary left Nazareth and traveled south some 70 miles to the hill country around Jerusalem.¹¹

Verse 41 is one of the great verses in Scripture which shows the humanity of babies in the womb.

Here John still a baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped in his mother's womb after Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting.

Even in the womb, John recognized Jesus as the Son of God. **Even in the womb, John was doing his work as the forerunner of Jesus.**

Notice that Elizabeth declares to Mary the same message that Gabriel spoke to Mary.

Look at verse 42 in comparison with verse 28.

Blessed are you among women!

Blessed is the fruit of your womb!

The words of verse 43 also should be noted.

Elizabeth recognized that Jesus was her Lord. "But why *is* this *granted* to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

How was Elizabeth able to speak this way?

As verse 41 makes clear, she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She was given understanding that was not the result of human wisdom and ability.

She was able to understand that John's movement in her womb was not just the ordinary movements that an unborn baby makes, but John's response to the presence of Jesus.

Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.

Blessed are those who continue to believe and trust in the Lord in all the challenges and situations they face!

¹¹ Green, 94-95.

3. MARY'S GREAT SONG OF PRAISE - LUKE 1:46-56

In looking at these verses, we keep in mind that Mary was most likely a teenager.

What an incredible calling was given to a young woman to play an important place in God's work of redemption.

Mary's hymn of praise shows her considerable maturity, faith, and understanding.

Mary demonstrates what is the most important attitude to have during this season – worship and humility before the Lord.

Mary dwells on the power, holiness, and mercy God. She is nothing herself before God.¹²

Young men and women, there is encouragement even from Mary that you be serious about living for Christ and understanding the Word of God.

This text is often called the *Magnificat*, a Latin word.

This Latin word comes from verse 46, which is similar to the English word **magnifies**.

We observe here that Mary was filled with praise because she knows the power of God that has saved her.

Mary was given perhaps the greatest earthly calling to be the mother of the Lord Jesus Christ. She still needed a Savior!

In verse 48 Mary speaks of her lowly state.

The Greek word used here is used in the LXX to speak often of affliction. Hagar, Leah, and Jacob all spoke of their affliction.

It is either then an expression of Mary's great humility before God and also it could speak of the very difficult situation she was facing, one not explained to us in Scripture.

¹² Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 93.

We also keep in mind that although Mary had her own circumstances her words also can be understood to embrace the history and people of Israel.¹³

And let us also consider the amazing prophecy of verse 48.

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.

One of my pastor friends remarked to me how this prophecy is truly amazing.¹⁴

Now we certainly can say that there is much misunderstanding and unlawful honor that is given to Mary even as I mentioned earlier.

But even the abuse of the honor given to Mary in a way stands as a fulfillment to this great prophecy.

Who knows the name of Mohammed's mother?

Who knows the name of Buddha's mother?

But the mother of Jesus – everyone knows who she is.

The language of Mary's words of praise recall what other song of praise spoken by a godly mother in the OT?

Mary's words are not identical, but certainly have a connection with the prayer and praise of Hannah found in 1 Samuel 2.

Verses 51-33 speak in a prophetic way declaring that God is the one who has and will show strength with His arm and scatter the proud in their imagination of their hearts.

He will put down the mighty from their thrones and exalt the lowly. He will fill the hungry with good things and send away the rich empty.

Mary understands the work of God in relationship to the past and His covenant promises to Israel.

And it is this hope that must be your foundation today. Time does not change the applicability of Mary's words or her hope.

¹³ John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, WBC 35A; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 69.

¹⁴ Pastor John Kirkwood.

This season where in a special way we remember the birth of Jesus is a time for us to renew our hope in God's promises and faithfulness. Our God is a God of wonders. What He has promised will come to pass.

Christmas is covenantal!

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for approximately three months. It **seems** that Mary returned home before Elizabeth gave birth or maybe it was right after John was born. It is not something given to us.

Luke 1 ends with the birth of John the Baptist and the prophecy of his father Zacharias. And this prepares the way for Luke 2, where Luke then focuses on the birth of Jesus about 5-6 months later.

CONCLUSION

1) Call to belief and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

2) God's greatness, His power, and love – do not mean we know how all things will work out.

However, God's power is often displayed so that we will trust completely in Him in all circumstances.

We have been praying for a church in Chengdu, China recently, Early Rain Covenant Church.

The pastor (Wang Yi) of this very brave congregation wrote a statement back in September that was to be released if he were ever arrested and held for more than 48 hours. That statement was released in December.

Part of his bold statement read:

If I am imprisoned for a long or short period of time, if I can help reduce the authorities' fear of my faith and of my Savior, I am very joyfully willing to help them in this way. But I know that only when I renounce all the wickedness of this persecution against the church and use peaceful means to disobey, will I truly be able to help the souls of the authorities and law enforcement. I hope God uses me, by means of first losing my personal freedom, to tell those who

have deprived me of my personal freedom that there is an authority higher than their authority, and that there is a freedom that they cannot restrain, a freedom that fills the church of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

This is only a small portion of Pastor Wang Yi's statement, but it captures his faith in God and the knowledge of God's mighty power.

With God nothing shall be impossible.

Let us never limit God's power or greatness.

Prayer

Hymn 153

BENEDICTION: 1 TIM. 1:17

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, *be* honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.