

Luke 1:26-38 (DHT)

²⁶In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph from the house of David; the virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸Entering among her, he said: Rejoice, you who have been blessed with grace; the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women. ²⁹But she was perplexed at this word, mulling over what to make of this greeting. ³⁰The angel said to her, Mary, do not be afraid, for you have found grace with God. ³¹Behold, your womb will conceive and bring forth a son; you shall name him Jesus. ³²He will be great and called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David, his father, ³³and he will reign forever over the house of Jacob; his kingdom will not end. ³⁴But Mary said to the angel: How will this be since I have not known a man?

³⁵The angel answered her: The Holy Spirit will come upon you; the power of the Most High will overshadow you; thus, the Holy One born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶Behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age; she who was called barren is in the sixth month. ³⁷For everything is possible with God. ³⁸Then Mary said, Behold, I am a servant of the Lord; may this happen according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

Introduction and the Big Idea

A few weeks ago, I was speaking with a friend about passages we hear at Christmastime, and the challenge preachers face to give new life to these sentimental passages. In Matthew, we read of the angelic declaration to Joseph that his virgin fiancé will give birth to the savior of the world, named Jesus. In Luke, we read of the angelic declaration to the virgin Mary that she will give birth to Jesus. Luke 1:26-38 is one of those familiar Christmastime passages we hear every year. Sometimes familiarity distracts us from the details. I’d like to walk through this famous passage with an eye on the fine details. When we do, we will see that Luke intentionally wrote of this event to emphasize the core message of the angel, that Mary’s son, Jesus, is the Messiah.

The Theophanic Gattung (Genre)¹

We know that Luke wrote of this event intentionally because this passage follows what scholars call the *Theophanic Gattung* or the Genre of Heavenly Visitation. While a theophany-proper refers to an appearance of God, such as the burning bush, the theophany-*genre* refers to an appearance of any heavenly being, such as angels like in our passage this morning. There are ten criteria necessary for a passage to qualify, all of which are found in our passage.

¹ Jeffrey Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) and *When did Eve Sin? The Fall and Biblical Historiography* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020). I have reordered the elements to fit the Luke 1 passage.

1. “Introduction in the Third Person” (vss. 26-27)

The passage immediately preceding ours tells of the conception of John the Baptist by Zechariah and Elizabeth. When our passage then begins *in the sixth month*, Luke attaches the storyline of Mary’s pregnancy to the timeline of Elizabeth’s. In vss. 26-27, Luke introduces us in the third person to those involved in this heavenly visitation. First, the angel named Gabriel. Luke tells us Gabriel was *sent by God to Nazareth*. God’s intent on entering space and time by taking the form of man was not by happenstance, but a highly orchestrated plan. Jesus came at a specific time, for a specific purpose, and those directly involved, firstly his parents, were specifically told.

God sent a specific angel Gabriel to a specific city in a specific region *to a virgin named Mary engaged to a man whose name was Joseph from the House of David*. In this second half of Luke’s introduction, we get some details that will be pertinent to the rest of the encounter. Mary’s status as a virgin is obviously well-known. Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph, meaning the son born to her would have all the legal implications that came with this man. The notable fact about this man Joseph that Luke *needs us to know* is that Joseph comes from the house of David. In chapter 3, Luke uses Jesus’s legal status as son of Joseph to kickstart his whole genealogy, intent on showing Jesus as the legal heir to the throne of David and the Son of God (vs. 23, 31, 38). While this heavenly visitation is completely between Gabriel and Mary, Joseph’s status as a descendant of David is *essential*. The four critical elements from this introduction are God as a message-sender, the angel Gabriel as the message-bearer, Mary as a virgin, and Joseph as son of David.

2. “Assertion of Grace” (vs. 28)

Luke goes on in verse 28, recording the opening dialogue of these characters, which includes an assertion of grace. Gabriel exclaimed: *Greetings!* This is the same word for rejoice. Upon entering, Gabriel exclaimed: *Rejoice!* Why should she rejoice? She should rejoice because she has been blessed with the grace of God, which Gabriel defines as the presence of God. Some say, and I think rightly so, that the restoration of the presence of God to his people is what the story of the Bible is all about. All of God’s people will get to enjoy the blessing and the grace of being in God’s presence, but there is something about Mary’s experience that renders her specially blessed. Living in God’s presence is a blessing of grace for God’s people; but Mary’s unique experience with God’s presence made the blessing of grace for her unique as well.

3. “Human Confusion” (vs. 29)

Rejoice, you who have been blessed with grace, for the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among all the women. This is Gabriel’s assertion of grace, which perplexed Mary. Verse 29 tells us Mary was confused. Gabriel just announced to her God’s intention to grace her with his presence in a way that exceeds all other women, *but she was perplexed at this word; mulling over what to make of this greeting.* This is a beautifully human moment from Mary. Of course, she would be confused and greatly troubled. There is an angel standing right in front of her! Moreover, he is telling her seemingly unbelievable things. In the Gospel of Matthew, the unnamed angel speaks to Joseph in a vision *after* Mary was already pregnant, which means Mary’s angelic encounter in our passage happened first. There was no mental preparation for this encounter.

4. “Human’s Name Declared,” 5. “Attempt to Quell Fear,” 6. “Positive Affirmation” (vs. 30)

The next three all happen in vs. 30. Gabriel says, *Mary, do not be afraid.* We finally hear Mary’s name from the mouth of Gabriel. Gabriel attempts to quell her fear by speaking her name. Over the last week, I’ve been reading through Proverbs, which is all about the goodness of wisdom. Prov. 9:10 famously tells us that the *fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.* But Gabriel tells Mary not to be afraid. The fear of the Lord and being afraid are different realities. Being afraid is an emotion when we feel unsafe; the fear of the Lord is the awestruck wonder at God’s greatness.² When we fear the Lord, we join the root of Jesse in *delighting* in the *fear* of the Lord (Isa. 11).

The proper fear of the Lord is not what Gabriel instructs Mary to avoid; rather he tells her not to be afraid. The reason she has no reason to feel unsafe is because she has found *grace* from God. The presence of God was intent on coming to her. Rather than deservedly being struck down due to her sin and the utter holiness of God, she was shown grace. When you receive grace from God, nothing should cause us to be afraid. *Though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling, we have no need to be afraid, for God is our refuge and strength, a proven help in trouble... YHWH of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress* (from Ps. 46). If you receive God’s grace, we have no need to be afraid. Mary has no need to be afraid; she *found God’s grace.*

² Michael Reeves, *What Does it Mean to Fear the Lord?*

7. “*Hieros Logos* (Sacred Discourse)” (vss. 31-33)

In the theophanic-genre, the sacred discourse is the *crux* of the whole encounter. God sent Gabriel to Mary to deliver the message in vss. 31-33. *Behold, you will conceive*. Whereas the angel appears to Joseph in a vision *after* she has already conceived, Gabriel’s visit to Mary happens before she conceives. *Behold, you will conceive and bring forth a son who you shall name Jesus*. In Matthew’s account the angel explains to Joseph that he is to name the boy Jesus—a name that means YHWH saves—for he will save his people from their sins. This isn’t an accidental name.

This boy Jesus *will be great and called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David*. No explanation is yet given for how this child will be Son of God. In fact, nothing thus far indicates Mary will have a virgin birth. The conception was told to her as a future event. She was soon marrying Joseph. Joseph is a son of David, which would render her son also a son of David. This connection to David is the central point to Gabriel’s message.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign forever over the house of Jacob; his kingdom will not end. In 2 Samuel 7, one of the most important chapters of the OT, God makes a covenant with David. Part of that covenant was a promise that God would raise up one descendent of David to reign on David’s throne *forever*. — *When you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son... my covenant-faithfulness will not depart from him... Your throne shall be established forever (2 Sam. 7:12-17)*.

Gabriel makes a significant claim about Jesus’ identity: Jesus is *the* messianic descendant of David. While there were many kings, the Davidic dynasty had one specific man in view, who would come from the *house of David* and be called Son of God. The necessity of Joseph coming from the *house of David* (vs. 27) is here made clear. Taking cues from 2 Sam. 7, Psalm 2 also identifies the Messiah who sits enthroned forever as the Son of God, an individual through whom the fate of all the nations and world is based. The inescapably messianic passages of 2 Sam. 7 and Ps. 2 are conflated in Gabriel’s short message to Mary about her not-yet-conceived son. Jesus is the long-awaited Davidic heir and long-expected messiah who will save God’s people from their sins by executing God’s righteous judgment against all opposed to his will.

“Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?” If Mary knew her Bible, then the answer is yes. Gabriel told Mary she will conceive and give birth to the Messiah.

Shortly after his birth, Simeon beheld the newborn baby Jesus and declared that he had *seen God’s salvation who God prepared to be a light to all the nations*, a nod to messianic themes that traverse Isaiah (Luke 2:29-32). Mary’s not-yet-conceived son Jesus will cause the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap, the dumb will speak, and the dead to live again. Gabriel delivered a most-glorious message to Mary, declaring to her the Gospel; the first declaration of the Gospel explicitly in the name of Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God and he has come! The child Mary would soon deliver would himself be the deliverer of all God’s people.³

8. “Human Inquiry or Protest” (vs. 34)

Mary listened to Gabriel’s message, and in vs. 34 inquires about one significant detail. Unlike Moses at the burning bush, she does not push against the call on her life. She does not seem to misunderstand the *that* of Gabriel’s message; she is confused about the *how*. Gabriel told her she will give birth, but two barriers are in the way: 1) she is not yet married; and 2) she has not yet known a man, especially her fiancé Joseph the Just. These are two huge barriers. Mary’s inquiry is clear: since I am living sexually-holy, *how* will I give birth to the Messiah?

9. “Continuing or Clarifying the *Heiros Logos*” (vss. 35-37)

Mary brings up a good point, so in vss. 35-37, the sacred discourse clarifies the *how*. *How will I give birth to the Messiah?* Gabriel responds: *the Holy Spirit will come upon you; the power of the Most High will overshadow you; thus, the Holy One born will be called the Son of God*. While the status of Jesus as the human heir of the Davidic dynasty has been established by Joseph the Just, *how* he would be *Son of God* has not been clearly established, until now. Jesus will be Son of God, because the not-yet-conceived child in Mary is from the Holy Spirit. There has been some chatter as of late that the conception of Jesus was from a sexual union between Mary and the Holy Spirit, but we know this is not true because Matthew tells us Joseph did not know Mary sexually *until after* Jesus was born (1:25). Mary’s conception was supernatural and there remain elements of mystery as well.

Even still, Gabriel told Mary a spectacular thing, and she knows this is not how the female body naturally works; this is why Jesus’ virgin birth, just like his miracles and resurrection, is *supernatural*. There is no *natural* explanation. Anticipating Mary’s next question, Gabriel tells her

³ Parts this paragraph, including a quoted line, come from the song, “Mary, Did you Know?”

why she should believe the word of God that these naturally impossible things will happen. *Behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age; she who was called barren is in the sixth month.* This would have been an extraordinary revelation to Mary, since Elizabeth was *advanced in years and barren* (vs. 18, 36). Just like the supernatural pregnancy of her far-distant relative Sarah, this could have only taken place at the doing of God.

This leads to Gabriel’s grand conclusion to Mary’s *how* question: *nothing is impossible with God.* The Creator of the Universe is necessarily superior to the laws of nature and can bend them at his will. Just as the Author of Life can give life to a dead womb, so also can he bring forth life from a virgin womb if it accomplishes his will of extending the knowledge of his glory through all his creation. *Nothing is impossible with God.*

10. “Conclusion in the Third Person” (vs. 38)

Mary responds by giving her wholehearted consent to the will of God not just for her life but for the life of the world accomplished by the Messiah she will bear. For a decent chunk of Church History, Mary was called the “Mother of God,” though the Roman Catholic distortion of that truth led Protestants to explain Mary’s motherhood in other terms. Mary yields her life to the will of God. Her only inquiry related to *how* God’s will would be done in her life; but she did not push back against the will of God. The will of God is immovable and will happen no matter what we do. Mary gives the only proper response when the will of God is revealed: *Behold, I am a servant of the Lord; may this happen according to your word.* And then, in the final clause of vs. 38, Luke concludes his telling of this encounter in the third person: *the angel departed from her.*

After Gabriel Prepares the Way: Never-Ending Praise

In belief, Mary wasted no time and went to see Elizabeth. This angel promised something in the future and rooted the sureness of this promise in something God had already done, the pregnancy of Elizabeth. When Mary arrived, John the Baptist leaped for joy in Elizabeth’s womb—and they say Baptists don’t dance. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed, *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ...Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord* (vss. 42-45). This prompted Mary to sing a magnificent song of praise to the Mighty, Holy, and Merciful God of her salvation.

Sometime later Jesus was born and there were shepherds in a field. One of the angels revealed to them the longed-for Messiah from the house of David was born. Suddenly appearing, the shepherds heard the song of boast from the angelic hosts: “Glory to God in the highest; peace to all who find his grace.” In belief, the angels sought out Joseph, Mary, and Jesus their Lord and shared their encounter with the angels. *Mary treasured up all these things in her heart (2:19)*. And the shepherds in their belief could not contain *themselves* from singing. In belief, when Simeon beheld the baby Messiah, his heart could not contain his song of blessing to the Lord. In belief, the prophetess Anna could not control her tongue from singing praises or thanks to God upon seeing the baby Messiah. Whether Mary, the angelic hosts, the shepherds, the righteous, or prophets—no matter who heard the good news that the long-promised and long-expected Messiah of God had arrived in the person Jesus, faith and songs of praise were the natural response.

To this, we must follow. We believe and sing praises to God that he did not leave us in our sins but made a way by promising to crush the head of the serpent and reverse the curse that we may be restored to life in his presence. We believe and sing praises to God that in times of waiting he made promises to his people. We believe and sing praises to God that he cannot and will not recant on any of his promises. We believe and sing praises to God that he fulfills his promises without fail. We believe and sing praises God that he sent his son Jesus to be born of a woman, born under the law that he may fulfill the law, living the life that we fail to live.

Standing before Pontius Pilate, Jesus declared the purpose of his birth. *For this reason, I was born (John 18:37)*. Jesus was born to die. Jesus was born to take your sins and mine and carry them all to the Cross. There is a glorious reason to celebrate at Christmas the birth of our Messiah, but let us never detach his birth from his overall mission. Before he was even conceived, he was declared the Messiah, meaning he would be pierced for the transgressions of God’s people, crushed for our iniquities by the will of God. Being the messiah, though, also means that because of his total innocence and suffering, he would be vindicated. After two days, on the third day, God would revive this Messiah and all who are joined to him by faith. We believe and sing praises to God, therefore, that out of the abundance of love for his people, he sent his son to die for our sins; to bridge the chasm that prevents us from living in God’s presence. We believe and sing praises to God for raising Jesus from the dead. And we believe and sing praises to God for his gracious invitation to all the world to follow Jesus into his kingdom that shall never end.

Let’s pray.