

lesson 14

Christmas Lesson

Mary, Did You Know?

MAIN IDEA

Jesus didn't take on human flesh so He could just be an adorable baby. He took on human flesh to die, the one thing God was incapable of doing.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do I really believe that nothing is impossible with God?

STUDY AIM

To understand that Jesus was veiled in human flesh so we could relate to Him

QUICK READ

Certainly, Mary was shocked and amazed to receive that news from Gabriel, but she placed her trust in God.

Introduction

In October 2002, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution authorizing President George W. Bush to use “any means necessary” to conquer Iraq and bring down Saddam Hussein. Five months later, when the U. S. launched air strikes against Baghdad, the American public quickly learned a new term: “shock and awe.” The idea behind the military strategy was to attack with such ferocity that the enemy would be confused and overwhelmed.¹

“Shock and awe” are terms we seldom associate with Christmas. Porcelain Nativity sets and picture-perfect Christmas card images paint an all-too-sterile and peaceful image of how God’s Son entered human history. Without question, Jesus’ birth brought unspeakable joy to His mother, Mary, and to Joseph, the man she was pledged to marry. But along with the joy, His birth brought shock and awe. His arrival disrupted the carefully made plans of a Galilean couple.

Jesus came to bring peace and make a way for sinful humanity to be reconciled to a holy and righteous God. But first, God’s Son entered a troubled world in an unexpected manner. God’s redemptive plan for humankind involved a young girl who willingly accepted her role as God’s servant.

Luke 1:30-38

³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth

to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² 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, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Angelic Announcement (1:26-33)

Luke's Gospel began with a pair of angelic announcements. First, the angel Gabriel appeared to an aged priest named Zachariah. The angel told Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a baby, even though they were far too old to conceive and bear a child. The boy would be named "John," and he would be a prophet like Elijah, whose mission would be "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17).

In the sixth month of the Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to make a second announcement. Gabriel appeared to a relative of Elizabeth's. The angel arrived in an obscure, out-of-the way Galilean town called Nazareth to an-

nounce God's plan to a young woman named Mary. When God's Son entered the world, He did not come to the center of government in Rome or the center of religion in Jerusalem. God entered history through a young woman in a town that had no bragging rights.

Nazareth

The Old Testament never mentions Nazareth. The small city was isolated from most of the economic centers and major trade routes in the time of Christ. The seeming insignificance of the village is apparent from Nathaniel's response to Philip when the latter said Jesus of Nazareth was the one Moses and the Prophets foretold. Nathaniel said, "Nazareth! Can any good come from there?" (John 1:46).²

The Bible makes it clear there is something special about Mary that sets her apart as a uniquely blessed woman of faith. Christian views about the mother of Jesus have varied widely through the ages. Early in Christian history, Mary held a respected position as a woman distinctly blessed by the Lord to bring God's Son into the world and nurture Him. Later, the Roman Catholic Church exalted her to a more venerated position as intercessor. They believe she could—from her heavenly position—serve as intermediary between sinners and the Savior. Protestants rejected that belief, along with other extra-biblical teachings such as Mary's Immaculate Conception, perpetual virginity, and bodily assumption

into Heaven. But in the process, we sometimes have failed to give Mary her due as a person of strong faith and character whom God selected as the mother of His Son.

Mary is identified as a virgin, pledged—literally “betrothed”—to a man named Joseph, who is identified as a descendant of King David. She lived in a culture in which young women married early, and it is likely she was a very young teenager, probably no more than 14 years old.

Betrothed

Mary was pledged—some translations say “betrothed” to Joseph. It was more binding than a modern engagement, but it was not yet a consummated marriage. During the time that passed between the betrothal and the marriage, the man took on responsibility for the woman as her provider and protector. However, the couple did not live together as husband and wife until after the marriage celebration.³

An old translation of verse 28, “Hail Mary, full of grace,” led some to the mistaken interpretation that Mary was a source of grace in and of herself. The better modern translation— “you who are highly favored”—makes it clearer that Mary was the object of God’s unmerited favor, not its source. “The Lord is with you,” Gabriel told Mary. In a one-of-a-kind way, the Lord was with Mary, but in another way, all who receive God’s grace receive the gift of His presence. Mary was

able to make an everlasting difference in God's redemptive plan for the ages because she accepted her role as a person graced by God.

At the same time, the old wording "Mary full of grace" is right in one sense. She was God's chosen vessel for delivering grace into the world. In a real sense, all of us who are recipients of grace also are meant to be vessels for bringing God's grace to others.

Gabriel told Mary she would conceive and give birth to a boy, who would be named Jesus—the Greek version of the Hebrew name "Joshua" or "Yeshua," which means "Yahweh is salvation." Gabriel makes it clear: This child will not be the son of Joseph but will be "the Son of the Most High"—God's own Son. Gabriel told Mary her son would be the long-awaited Messiah, who would be entitled to the throne of King David. But unlike the Old Testament sovereign, Jesus' kingdom "will never end" (1:33).

Nothing Is Impossible With God (1:34-38)

Understandably, Mary was frightened by the angelic appearance and troubled by the angel's message. She didn't understand what was going on. But she knew one thing—she and her husband-to-be had not had intimate relations. Mary was young, but apparently her mother had explained to her the basics of human reproduction. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" she asked. Every Jewish girl of Mary's day prayed

that she might one day be the mother of the Messiah—but after marriage, not before.

The angel offered no thorough explanation, but he did tell her the baby who would be born to her would be God’s Son. The angel said “the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” The angel did not describe an act of procreation in any conventional sense. The angel described a unique act of creation. The picture is similar to the imagery of God’s Spirit hovering over the watery void in Genesis 1 and bringing all things into being.

Gabriel described something beyond human comprehension. The birth the angel described defies all human experience and confounds our expectations. However, Gabriel told Mary that “no word from God will ever fail” (1:37). As the King James Version says, “For with God nothing shall be impossible.”

The Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew both emphasize the miraculous nature of Jesus’ birth. Jesus was born to Mary when she was a virgin. His unique birth was in keeping with His unique identity. As John’s Gospel says, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In Jesus, God became human. Jesus came to reveal the character and nature of God the Father. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “The Son is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). If we want to know what God is like, we can look at Jesus.

Jesus was not only fully divine, but also fully human. He identified with humankind, even to the point of death. In that way, God the Son did what neither God the Father nor God the Holy Spirit could do. Jesus came to be the Suffering Servant prophesied in the Old Testament—“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

Jesus, who committed no sin, took upon Himself our sins and made it possible for rebellious humanity to be reconciled to a holy God. That’s why in many churches we observe the Lord’s Supper just prior to Christmas. The memorial meal reminds us we should not focus only on a cuddly baby cradled in the arms of his mother Mary. We should remember that the Son of God willingly became one of us. He identified with humankind, even to the point of enduring the cruelest form of death imaginable. But we also remember God raised Him from the tomb, vindicating His Son and demonstrating His victory over sin and death.

Implications and Actions

Mary demonstrated wisdom and maturity far beyond her age in her response to the angel: “I am the Lord’s servant...May your word to me be fulfilled” (1:38). Mary was young, but

she was old enough to recognize the immediate implications of what she had been told. Joseph might not understand and seek to have her stoned to death as an adulteress. From the account in Matthew's Gospel, Joseph had no intention of publicly disgracing Mary, but initially planned to sever their pledge quietly. However, an angel appeared to Joseph, assuring him the child in Mary's womb was God's Son, and he should not be afraid to accept Mary as his wife (Matthew 1:19-20). However, Mary didn't know that at this point.

Furthermore, even if Joseph accepted her word, there was no guarantee her parents would understand. Certainly, gossiping neighbors would not accept the story that God had miraculously created this baby in her womb. She likely would be scandalized and rejected. But she accepted her role as a servant of God, and she said "yes" to whatever her Master said. Mary trusted God and obeyed Him, whatever the cost might be.

If we are serious about being used by God and if we want to be His faithful followers, it means we need to submit to the role of God's servant. We need to accept God's will for our lives. Obeying His will may be disruptive. God's purpose for our lives may not coincide with the plans we have made. Following God's plan may seem impossible. In fact, it likely is impossible for us, apart from His empowering and enabling.

However, there is no greater joy than becoming an instrument of God's grace—a vessel He can use to bring others into relationship with Him. To be used by God, we should follow the example Mary set. We must rely upon God's grace, trust

Him to honor His promises, even when we don't understand everything, and walk by faith in obedience.

Questions

1. When God chose to send His Son into the world, why do you think He chose to do it through a humble virgin from an out-of-the-way town?

2. When the angel appeared to Mary, do you think she was more frightened by what she could not understand or by what she did understand?

3. What were some of the fears Mary undoubtedly felt? What are some of the fears we must face if we are going to be obedient to God's plan for our lives?

4. What are some of the things we learn about the nature and character of God by looking at the life of Jesus that we might not know otherwise?

5. How do we respond when God seems to be calling us to do something that seems impossible? How can we respond more faithfully?

NOTES

¹ <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/1103shock/>.

² *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, "Nazareth," ed. Watson E. Mills (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), p. 605.

³ Malcolm O. Tolbert, "Luke," in *Luke-John*, vol. 9 of *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 22.