

LUKE 1:26-34

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!’ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’

“And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’”¹

Christmas art shows Jesus’ family—the Holy family—as peaceful and calm. In multiple artistic renditions of the family of Joseph and Mary, the family is idealised. In the paintings, a serene Mary receives the news of the Annunciation as a kind of benediction; but that is not at all how Luke tells the story. Mary was “greatly troubled” and “afraid” at the angel’s appearance [LUKE 1:29].

The **NEW LIVING TRANSLATION** captures Mary’s stress by noting that she was “confused and disturbed.”² I appreciate one recent rendering of this specific passage. [Mary] “was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that.”³ When Gabriel delivered the lofty words about the Son of the Most High, whose kingdom will never end, Mary had only one thing on her mind: “I am a virgin!”

Contemporary feminists notwithstanding, an unmarried mother, especially if she is poor, is consigned to enduring a great trial. The prospects for an unmarried mother today are less than exciting. That young woman may expect a life of deprivation and hardship as she struggles to raise her child alone and without the complementing hand of a loving husband and a caring father. No wonder the Jewish teenager Mary was “greatly troubled”—she faced the same prospects, even without any passionate acts proceeding!

Not so long ago, unwed mothers were ashamed when their sin was exposed. I recall the response of families to the news that a daughter was pregnant during the days of my youth. The young woman would be hurried out of town to keep her out of sight from prying eyes. Shut up in a home for unwed mothers, she would give birth in secret, often surrendering the child for adoption without ever seeing the baby following the birth.

In modern North America, more than one million teenage girls get pregnant each year. With hundreds of thousands of teenage girls getting pregnant out of wedlock each year in North America, Mary’s predicament has undoubtedly lost some of its force, but in a close knit Jewish community in the first century, the news that the angel delivered could not have been entirely welcome. The law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant as an adulteress. As an adulteress, she was subject to death by stoning.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² **Holy Bible: New Living Translation** (Tyndale House, Wheaton, IL 1996)

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 1993)

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Matthew tells that Joseph generously considered divorcing Mary instead of pressing charges, until an angel showed up to assuage his feelings of betrayal. Luke tells how Mary hurried off to the one person who could possibly understand what she was going through, Elizabeth, her relative, who had miraculously become pregnant in old age following another angelic annunciation.

Elizabeth indeed believes Mary's story and shares her joy, and yet the scene poignantly underscores the contrast between the two women. The whole countryside is talking about the miracle of Elizabeth's healed womb; meanwhile, Mary has to hide the shame of her own miracle.

A few months later, the birth of John the Baptist took place with great fanfare, complete with midwives, doting relatives and the traditional village chorus celebrating the birth of a Jewish male. Six months after that, Jesus was born far from home, with no midwife, no extended family, and no village chorus present. A male head of household would have sufficed for the Roman census. Did Joseph drag his pregnant wife along to Bethlehem in order to spare her the ignominy of childbirth in her home village?

C. S. Lewis has written about God's plan: *The process grows narrower and narrower, sharpens at last into one small bright point like the head of a spear. It is a Jewish girl at her prayers.* Reading the evangelists' accounts of Jesus' birth, one may well tremble to think of the fate of the world resting on the responses of two rural teenagers. Despite their portrayal in contemporary art and literature as twenty-something parents, Joseph and Mary were mere children. Mary could not have been more than fourteen years of age, perhaps even as young as twelve; and Joseph could not have been more than nineteen.

How many times must Mary have gone over the angel's words as she felt the Son of God kicking against the wall of her uterus? How many times must Joseph have second-guessed his own encounter with an angel? Was it just a dream? What embarrassment must he have felt as he endured the hot shame of living among neighbours who could plainly see the changing shape of the woman he planned to marry?

We know nothing of Jesus' grandparents. What must they have felt? Did they respond like so many parents of unmarried teenagers today, with an outburst of fury and moral lectures and then perhaps a period of sullen silence until at last the bright-eyed newborn arrives to melt the ice and arrange a fragile family truce?

Nine months of awkward explanations, the lingering scent of scandal—it seems almost as if God arranged the most humiliating circumstances possible for the entrance of His Son, as if to avoid any accusation of favouritism. I am impressed that when the Son of God became a human being, He played by the rules ... the harsh rules of a small town. Small towns do not treat kindly young boys who grow up with questionable paternity.

Malcolm Muggeridge observed that in modern times, with family-planning clinics offering ways to correct "mistakes" that might disgrace a family name, *It is, in point of fact, extremely improbable ... that Jesus would have been permitted to be born at all. Mary's pregnancy, in poor circumstances, and with the father unknown, would have been an obvious case for an abortion; and her talk of having conceived as a result of the intervention of the Holy Ghost would have pointed to the need for psychiatric treatment, and made the case for terminating her pregnancy even stronger. Thus our generation, needing a Saviour more, perhaps, than any that has ever existed, would be too human to allow one to be born.*

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Mary, whose family was not planned, had a different response. She heard the angel out, pondered the enormous consequences, and replied, “I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” [LUKE 1:38]. Every work of God comes with two edges—great joy and great pain, and in her response, Mary embraced both.⁴

Though Mary, a mere child, eventually accepted the angel’s announcement, it remains that Mary at first doubted the Virgin Birth. In fact, she was the first person to doubt the Virgin Birth. Hers was not the haughty, arrogant attitude of disbelief displayed as a badge of honour, but a genuine questioning of the intent of the Father.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH IS DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE — When the angel first appeared to Mary he greeted her with the words, “Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!” Mary was rightly “troubled at the saying.” Few of us have ever been addressed by an angel, much less been in the presence of an angel. Had we experienced such an encounter, we would remember the encounter by the dread that overwhelmed us. Doctor Luke says that Mary was in extreme confusion as result of the message that the angel delivered. No doubt, she was confused because the greeting referred to her as highly favoured. Obviously, the Lord Himself favoured Mary. Moreover, this young girl was informed that the Lord Himself was with her. Whatever could such a greeting mean?

The greeting speaks of God’s sovereignty. We dare not dictate to God whom He shall choose to fulfil His will. Pastors are not called by a church, despite common sentiment and misuse of the term “call” in the vernacular; a pastor is divinely appointed and his appointment is acknowledged as the congregation accepts the mind of the Spirit.

We dare not demand of God how He shall gift us when we are saved; rather the Spirit of God “apportions to each one individually as He wills” [1 CORINTHIANS 12:11]. Harder still for many of us to accept is the fact that God chooses to save whom He wills. “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” [EPHESIANS 1:4-6]. If we accept God’s sovereignty in these particular areas of Christian life, accepting the fact that He chose Mary to bear the Son of God poses no great difficulty. This young Jewish girl was assured that God had divinely chosen her and that the choosing was for reasons of His own.

By the angel’s greeting, God not only conveyed to Mary His sovereignty, but He stated frankly that His presence and His power was with her. The teenager could not know what lay ahead, but God was even then comforting her with the promise that He was with her. It is a remarkable fact that nowhere in the Word of God are we promised that we will be kept from difficulties in this age. In fact, we are clearly warned: “in the world you will have tribulation” [JOHN 16:33]. At the conclusion of the first missionary journey, Paul revisited the nascent churches confirming the new saints with the comforting word that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” [ACTS 14:22]. In the last letter he would write to Timothy, his protégé, the Apostle warned God’s redeemed that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” [2 TIMOTHY 3:12]. These verses provide just a sampling of the negative warnings of trials and tests for the child of God.

⁴ I am deeply indebted for the introductory thoughts to Philip Yancey, **The Jesus I Never Knew** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1995)

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Though God has not promised to keep us from trials, He has promised that He will be with us in the trials. The last promise Jesus gave His disciples before ascending into the Glory was this: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:20]. Among the rich promises included in the Hebrews Letter is one assuring each Christian that God has said, “‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we can confidently say,

‘The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?’

[HEBREWS 13:5, 6]

The angel continued his announcement by informing Mary that she would shortly be pregnant, and after the normal course of time, she would bear a child. The child that she would bring into the world was destined to be the Messiah. That child Mary would carry was very Son of the Most High. That child would receive the throne of His father David, and He would rule over the house of Jacob forever. That child was appointed to reign over a never-ending kingdom. All that the young girl had heard of Messiah—the expectation that He would deliver His people, the anticipation of the fulfilment of ancient prophecy—all came together in the angel’s announcement.

Mary would require the presence of the Lord because what she was about to experience would entail grave difficulties both for her and for her family. Mary would require the presence of the Lord because what she would shortly undergo defied human experience. It is not so much that Mary did not believe the angelic announcement; she questioned the meaning of his words. Her experience denied what the angel was saying. Parthenogenesis may occur in frogs, but twelve-year-old girls do not become pregnant without human intervention. So Mary doubted, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Have you ever tried to define a miracle? Some years past, in the same week, newspapers reported the case of a young woman diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Told she had but months to live, in the course of time she was discovered to be pregnant. Somehow, the normal adjustment of hormones required to support her pregnancy caused remission of the tumour. We call it a miracle. That same week, the papers also reported the case of a man who had been blind for nearly two decades. Walking through his home one day, he bumped his head. He saw light and gradually over the course of the day, a measure of sight was restored. What is this but a miracle?

Events such as these are well documented in medical literature; but are they miracles? In either instance, and in multiplied similar cases, such events are actually the result of the operation of well-established physiological principles.

A miracle requires the suspension of normal laws that regulate physical phenomena. The growth of grass and the budding of trees in the spring are not miracles; they are phenomena that are universally recognised. Bypassing spring entirely due to atmospheric dust would not be a miracle, for it would have a demonstrable cause. Should grass grow while the ground was frozen or trees bud during mid-winter darkness, we would be suspending recognised laws of nature; this would be a miracle. Then we would be approximating a miracle. Miracles are recognised as miracles primarily because physical laws are suspended. A miracle is a transient event, an occurrence that could only happen if the laws were somehow set aside by the keeper of those laws.

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Three men walking about in the flames of a furnace is a miracle; the laws of thermodynamics, combustion and physiology are suspended as the men walk about in the flames. The sun holding its place in the sky for the space of about a day is a miracle; the laws of astrophysics are suspended. Water changed into wine within the span of a breath is a miracle; the laws of biogenics are suspended. Restoring a hand that is withered and shrivelled, giving sight to eyes blinded by injured optic nerves, causing deaf ears to hear, giving the power of speech to mute tongues, and bringing dead bodies to life ... these are miracles that suspend the laws of physiology. Just so, pregnancy without intercourse is miraculous because the laws of physiology and reproduction are suspended.

Mary recognised that the message of the angel was pointing to the miraculous. “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” The question is appropriate, for biologic laws must be suspended for her to bear a child. The birth would require ovulation without stimulation; there would need to be fertilisation without sperm. For this birth to occur there would be pregnancy without human intervention. Mary was the first person to question the Virgin Birth; nevertheless, she yielded to the will of God.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH IS REASONABLE TO BELIEVE — “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Mary’s question must be answered for her concerns to be dispelled. Fortunately, the messenger of God provided her with the answer. “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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God” [LUKE 1:35-37].

If the birth of a child without human intervention were commonplace, there would be no miraculous element, and consequently, there would be no controversy. It is precisely because all human experience points to predictable biologic phenomena that the thought of the virgin birth must be categorised as miraculous. Virgins do not become pregnant. The birth of a child is *prima facie* evidence that the mother was not a virgin!

Specifically, Mary’s objection to the angelic annunciation pointed out the crucial fact, “a man I have not known” (literal translation)! This was in keeping with Doctor Luke’s earlier, precise statement that the angel Gabriel was sent to “a virgin” [Greek, *parthénos*]. Similarly, the evangelist Matthew cites the prophecy of Isaiah in his account of Jesus’ birth. “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

“The virgin will conceive and bear a son,
and they will call him ‘Immanuel

(which means, God with us)” [MATTHEW 1:22, 23].

On the surface, the Virgin Birth appears unreasonable; but let’s explore the issue at depth greater than the merely superficial. The report of Jesus’ birth is reasonable, because of **THE PURPOSE OF HIS BIRTH**. The birth of Messiah was in fulfilment of prophecies too numerous to cite in the brief time allotted for the message this morning. It will be beneficial to note some of the more explicit prophecies. When our first parents were deceived by the serpent, the Lord God first addressed the serpent. Listen to the curse that God placed on the serpent. “The LORD God said to the serpent,

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

‘Because you have done this,
 cursed are you above all livestock
 and above all beasts of the field;
 on your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.
 I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and her offspring;
 he shall bruise your head,
 and you shall bruise his heel.’”

[GENESIS 3:14, 15]

The final portion of the curse speaks of the serpent striking the heel of the offspring of the woman and the response of the woman’s offspring. This is what theologians refer to as **the protoevangelium**. The translators of the text I use thought it was helpful for our understanding to refer to “the offspring of the woman,” but the phrase literally speaks of “the seed of the woman.” Children are the result of the “seed” of man, not of “seed” of woman. Women provide an egg; men provide sperm—“seed.”

The child that Mary bears is the promised *seed of the woman*. This One will be born in a manner different from other men. This One shall be born to crush the head of the serpent, and thereby “destroy him who holds the power of death, that is, the devil” [HEBREWS 2:14]. Throughout Scripture, the adversary is oftentimes referred to as a serpent [cf. REVELATION 12:9; 20:2]. The serpent’s head must be crushed by One greater than him. The adversary is a powerful being, and He who crushes him of necessity must be greater than he is. The promised seed of the woman is born to destroy the devil and his power.

Before pride caused his fall, the devil was the cherub covering the throne of God [cf. ISAIAH 14:9-14; EZEKIEL 28:11-19]. Now, this malevolent being seeks to turn man from knowledge of the True and Living God. Now, the evil one “blind[s] the minds of unbelievers” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:4]—people who have been “captured by him to do his will” [2 TIMOTHY 2:26]. The promised Deliverer, who would crush the serpent’s head, must be greater than Satan. That One must be very God, and thus if He is to become man, it is reasonable to expect that He would be born in fashion other than the normal manner.

At Calvary, the serpent’s head was crushed. Scripture pointedly declares, “God made [us] alive together with [Christ Jesus], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” [COLOSSIANS 2:13-15]. The process that began at Calvary will be complete for God’s people at the resurrection.

This is why Paul exults in Christ’s victory. “When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’
 ‘O death, where is your victory?’
 O death, where is your sting?’

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:54-57].

The Virgin Birth is reasonable because **GOD INITIATED AND CONTROLLED THE PROCESS**. God Himself oversaw the entire process of the birth of His Son. He is Creator! It is reasonable that God should do as He wishes. Had the Son of God simply appeared, could we have identified with Him; He would then have little in common with us in our misery? One of the comforting truths of Scripture is that the Lord has identified with us.

The writer of the Hebrew Letter testified, “Since ... we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” [HEBREWS 4:14-16].

A father met his daughter following Sunday School. He made small talk and asked her what the teacher had taught that day. The child laughed and said the teacher told a story about a man who was swallowed by a great fish and how he survived even in the belly of the fish. “Isn’t that silly, Daddy? A fish can’t swallow a man.”

“But, darling,” explained the wise father, “the Bible says God prepared a great fish. Jonah was swallowed by a fish which God prepared.”

“Oh,” responded the child, “if you’re going to put God in the story I believe it.”

The action of the Creator cannot be unreasonable. Those who reject Him and what He does are the ones who are unreasonable. He who created all things can suspend or alter His laws as He wills; those laws exist by His Word. As those who worship Him, we confess that “for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” [1 CORINTHIANS 8:6].

The Virgin Birth is reasonable because **GOD CANNOT LIE**. We are told of the birth of Jesus our Lord because the Holy Spirit superintended the recording of the account. Matthew takes great pains to ensure that we understand that Mary was a virgin and that the child she bore was of the Holy Spirit. Doctor Luke, a physician, concluded that Jesus was born of a virgin. Were these the only accounts, they would suffice to demonstrate that the Virgin Birth of Jesus is reasonable; but there are other testimonies.

In addition to the multiplied prophecies of the Old Testament, Paul, in his letter to the churches of Galatia, wrote: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” [GALATIANS 4:4, 5]. Indeed, John testifies that “The Word became flesh” [JOHN 1:14]. Together with the Apostle, we confess, “Great indeed ... is the mystery of godliness: [God] was manifested in the flesh” [1 TIMOTHY 3:16].

The Virgin Birth is reasonable because it has **RESULTED IN LIFE FOR MANY PEOPLE**. Without the Virgin Birth, the adversary remains undefeated. Without the Virgin Birth, there can be no salvation. For His own reasons, God chose to send His Son into the world through the womb of a virgin. After the fact, we can rationalise the event and say that Jesus is able to sympathise with us because He shared our humanity. We can rationalise that He is the Son of Man, the Second Adam who redeemed fallen creation. However, we confess that we do not know the reasons God chose a virgin to bear His Son into the world. We know, however, that His coming set in motion salvation for many.

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Christ Jesus came to put away sin. He has provided freedom from condemnation, freedom from sin, salvation for all who receive Him; He has provided all this through the sacrifice of Himself. How humbling is that indecipherable verse in the Second Letter to the Church of God in Corinth. We read, “[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21].

John presents a powerful truth in the opening chapter of the Gospel that bears his name. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.”) And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” [JOHN 1:14-18].

Throughout the world are those individuals who confess through participating in the Lord’s Table that they have received one blessing after another because Christ the Lord was born of a virgin. Without that birth, there would be no salvation. Though the mystery is great, it is no less valid and reasonable, for the united testimony of multiplied millions of saints testifies to the rational nature of belief in that birth.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH IS ESSENTIAL FOR OUR FAITH — The Bible is a seamless garment. If we can disprove one portion of God’s Word, then no portion is credible. If God has failed to convey truth at one point, then we are right to question what He says at every point. If man evolved as result of some fortuitous concurrence of time and chance as lightning flashed through a reducing atmosphere at the intersection of a primordial soup rich in essential amino acids, then man does not need a Saviour. If there never was a Fall, there need not be a Redeemer. To establish the essential element of the Virgin Birth, consider again the results of the Fall.

Think again of the account provided in **GENESIS CHAPTER THREE**. Earlier, I alluded to the fact that “the seed of the woman” must fulfil the prophecy given by the Lord that the serpent’s head would be crushed. If God erred in this prophecy, we cannot be certain that the serpent is defeated. If this prophecy is not true, we cannot know that we are delivered from our sin. Quite candidly, if God has lied in telling us of the means by which His Son was brought into the world, we cannot know whether He speaks truth at any other point. God has given us His inerrant, infallible Word that we might assuredly know all that is necessary for life and salvation. No, the birth of Christ the Lord from the virgin’s womb is essential for salvation and essential for deliverance from sin.

When Mary visited Elizabeth, the child Elizabeth carried leaped in the womb and his mother rejoiced. Mary responded to Elizabeth’s blessing with a song of praise.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me
blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

THE FIRST PERSON TO DOUBT THE VIRGIN BIRTH

And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever”

[LUKE 1:46-55].

Mary moved from doubt to joyous praise as she accepted that God was at work, bringing deliverance to His people. Well could this humble teenager rejoice in God her Saviour, for “His mercy is for those who fear Him, from generation to generation.” Without this birth, there would be no redemption; but Christ is born that man may live!

It is Christmas, and the thoughts of the world turn to ... what? We who name the Name of the Son of God turn our thoughts to redemption and atonement, for that is the Christmas message. Christ was born that man might live. Christ was born that man might be forgiven. Christ was born that by His sacrifice He might provide a way into the presence of the Father—the Living God. Christ was born that sin might be forever conquered and so that the power of the evil one may be forever broken. All this began with the incarnation, the birth of a child from a virgin womb. Who can explain this glorious, reasonable statement of the work of God in the midst of time? Yet, for us, this truth is again proclaimed and an unbelieving world once again admits what they refuse to believe—God became man. Born of a virgin, Christ the Lord has come. Amen.