

THE PREPARATION OF MARY

Series: To Make Ready a People Prepared for the Lord

by Doug Goins

The four narratives in chapter 1 of the gospel of Luke, which cover the fifteen-month period just before the birth of the Lord Jesus, tell of the preparation of four Israelites whom God chooses to use in his eternal plan of redemption. The first narrative (verses 5-25), tells of the angel Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah the priest, as he ministered in the temple, of the staggering news of the birth of John, the forerunner of Messiah. John would grow up to be filled with the Holy Spirit and, through his preaching, the hearts of all Israel would be prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ.

The second narrative introduces another appearance by the angel Gabriel. This time he makes an announcement that is even more incredible. His annunciation is majestic, powerful, awesome. My son, Trevor, would describe it as "totally rad." In these events we are confronted, above all else, with the mystery of the supernatural at work. We find them difficult to understand and respond to. Even the Apostle Paul admitted as much in his letter to Timothy: "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16). Zechariah and Mary at first responded to Gabriel with apprehension and fear. We, too, should approach these stories of mystery with humility, with a healthy sense of reverential fear. We should be awestruck by what God is doing through this holy history.

By this time, Elizabeth is in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Our focus shifts from the temple in Jerusalem, in the province of Judea, to a home in Nazareth, in the province of Galilee. Here is the unparalleled announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel. It begins with Gabriel's appearance. Verses 26-29:

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, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.

From our human perspective, God's choice of the province of Galilee seems suspect. Why didn't he choose Judea, the geographical heart of Israel, the center of his dealings with mankind down through the centuries? Judeans took great pride in their identity and place. Galilee, by contrast, lay to the north, in the hill country. It had long been disdained. Here is what the prophet Isaiah said about it back when the Galilee of the New Testament period encompassed the tribal territories of Zebulun and Naphtali: "In the former time [God] brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali," (Isaiah 9:1b). Even in the Old Testament times, Galilee had been overrun by pagan religion. Now, at the time of Gabriel's appearance, Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was tetrarch of Galilee. He had followed in his father's footsteps, introducing Roman idolatry and barbarism into the life of this province. Yet, God chose Galilee over Judea.

God's choice of cities also seems illogical from our human point of view. He did not choose Jerusalem, the city of David, the heart of religious influence and life in the nation. Jesus called it the "city of the Great King." Jerusalem was the religious, political and social seat of power and authority in the life of Israel; but, God chose Nazareth, situated some 70 miles northeast of Jerusalem, just above the main caravan route between Jerusalem and Tyre and Sidon, on the north coast of Israel.

Nazareth had a population of about 15000. The city had many hostels to serve the needs of the myriad

travelers--Roman soldiers, pilgrims and merchants who journeyed back and forth on the caravan route. Under these influences, immorality and corruption had become commonplace in the life of the city. No wonder Nathaniel responded, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) when he learned that Jesus came from that city. Yet, God chose Nazareth, not Jerusalem, "the city of the Great King."

God's choice of the specific site of Gabriel's annunciation of the coming Messiah can cause us to wonder also. He chose a home, not the temple. The temple was God's very dwelling place, the designated holy place of worship and sacrifice, the place where God's glory and blessing had been known. But God chose a private home, a humble dwelling in all likelihood, devoid of any institutional religious sanctions or influence. God passed over the temple and chose a simple Galilean home.

The personalities introduced in this paragraph are fascinating. Joseph, according to Matthew's gospel, was a lineal descendant of King David through Solomon. Matthew describes him as a "righteous man." He was a man of fairness and justice. Matthew tells us that he was a carpenter, a working man. He was neither poor nor excessively wealthy.

And we are introduced to Mary. The name "Mary" is really a Greek translation of the Hebrew name Miriam. We Protestants, I feel, have over-reacted down through the years to the unfortunate Mariolatry of the Roman Catholic Church. We have almost consigned the virgin to oblivion. Mary deserves a more objective evaluation. These passages will help that understanding.

Luke's genealogy of Jesus, in chapter 3, shows Mary to be a direct descendant of King David through his son Nathan. She was "betrothed," we are told, engaged to Joseph. Betrothal in that first century was much different than an engagement is today. Betrothal, which lasted one year, was a solemn undertaking to marriage, really a pre-marriage relationship. Consecrated before a priest, betrothal was so binding that divorce was necessary to break it. Mary was a virgin, we learn. In a town of many sinister influences to immorality, this girl had remained morally pure. She was a chaste woman, in spite of the environment she lived in.

Gabriel's greeting is both beautiful and powerful: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" "Hail" is a greeting, but it is also a cognate of the word "favor," or literally, "grace." So his greeting is really, "Grace, O graced one." The salutation reveals Mary's God-developed character, which fits her for the responsibility to which God is going to call her. Gabriel literally says to her, "Grace unto you. You are endued with grace. The Lord is with you." Mary is greeted as a young woman who has accepted God's grace and lives it out in quietness, peace and purity. Unaffected by the Nazarene environment, she is protected and sustained by God's grace. It is an objective statement of her character, her graceful lifestyle.

Gabriel's greeting drew a "troubled" response from Mary. But hers was a very different response than Zechariah, who "feared" the angel when he was visited by him in the temple. Mary is greatly troubled, even confused by the message, not the angelic messenger. The problem for her is the context of Gabriel's salutation, the saying itself. She could not understand it because she was not conscious of the graceful beauty of her character. There is no self-consciousness in this young woman. We are going to see that more fully in her additional two responses to God's word and the message from Gabriel.

In verses 30-37, Gabriel gives to Mary the specific message that he has been entrusted with, the news of God's grace that is going to bring salvation to all the world. Verses 30, 31:

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus."

When Gabriel first greeted Mary, he said, "Grace," to her. Here he uses that same word again: "You have found 'favor' with God." And this time he says, "Do not be afraid." It is a new intention of the word "grace." This time the word is not used to describe her character, rather it is a description of how God's grace is going to affect her and work through her to impact all of human history. The preposition "with" ("You have found favor 'with' God") changes the focus of the word. It means not merely that God is conferring grace, but that she has found grace,

literally, "by the side of God, in the fellowship of God."

Then the angel begins to unfold the mystery for which God has chosen her. She will conceive, and following the nine months of pregnancy she will give birth to a boy. Further, the angel names the baby. The birth announcement is being dictated even before the conception. "You are to name him Jesus (*Y'shua*)."

"Jesus," the Greek word for Joshua, means "Jehovah-Salvation." There were lots of Jewish boys named Joshua in memory of Joshua, the leader of Israel's conquest of Canaan. Moses had given him that name after he had returned from the land, one of only two spies who thought that Israel could triumph in Canaan. Thus that name was worn proudly down through the rest of Israel's history. Beyond that, however, many parents named their sons *Y'shua*, Joshua, in hopeful expectation that he might be the expected One, the Messiah, the Deliverer.

According to Matthew's gospel, Gabriel appeared to Joseph, and said to him, "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). At last, after centuries of waiting, there was coming the One who would bear that name perfectly; he would fulfill its meaning completely. "Jehovah Salvation"--that name focuses on one of the central themes of Christmas, the universal need for a Savior. Jesus Christ offers deliverance from the bondage of sin. This was attested to by Paul, writing to Timothy some 65 years later, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1Timothy 1:15).

During the Christmas season, the *Jews For Jesus* movement has in recent years run full-page advertisements in several newspapers. Under the title, "The Messiah Has Come And His Name Is *Y'shua*," here is what that advertisement says about this Messiah who was coming:

Now many would have liked it better if the angel had said, "And you are to give him the name Santa Claus because he will bring you presents."

Many people would rather not hear about sin. But it's a fact, it's a condition, it's a problem that needs a dramatic solution. The condition of humanity (call it sin if you have the courage) has been lamented for centuries. Oh yes, there has been progress, but it's the wrong kind of progress because now a few desperate men pushing a few buttons can annihilate all life on this problem-ridden planet. Is that a solution?

God promised a Messiah, a deliverer, a problem-solver. And if there is anything more difficult to accept than the fact of sin (yours, and ours), it's the idea that God solves our problems. But he can! He can make us want peace, give us hearts to care about one another, relieve guilt, mend broken homes, give meaning to our lives, and diminish the din of the twentieth century with the music of his love.

*God's dramatic solution: *Y'shua*. That news is going to make some people unhappy.*

Maybe you don't like Jews. Maybe you have a grudge against Christians. Maybe you don't like your sins, yourself, or the God who made you. Sorry about that, but it doesn't really change the truth. Before you dismiss what should be good news, remember that the truth might be so simple that it was overlooked by the people who should have known.

*The need was, and is due to the "human condition" (just in case you're choking over that three-letter word, "sin"). God's salvation is a sacrifice, a sin bearer, a savior, a mediator, a mentor, a Messiah. *Y'shua* is all that and more.*

The angel Gabriel goes on to describe the "much more." This baby is more than the Savior of the world. He is the Lord of Life, the Ruler, the ultimate authority. Verses 32 and 33:

"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 for ever; and of

his kingdom there will be no end."

Gabriel uses beautiful poetic language to establish all the Messianic fulfillment inherent in this baby boy Jesus. He will have unparalleled fame and unparalleled effect in his ministry. All of human history, over the last 2000 years, of course, attest to his greatness.

The angel goes on to say that this One will be called "the Son of the Most High." "The Son of the Living God" again, an unrivaled claim. Matthew records God's own confirming word of that reality. Some thirty years later, as Jesus was being baptized by John at the Jordan, Matthew 3. records this amazing event:

When Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

A filial relationship established: a Father and a Son, Deity and Humanity.

The angel goes on to talk about an unlimited monarchy, the absolute reign of this One. These words, at the end of verse 32 and in 33, really echo the words of the prophet Nathan as he spoke on the Lord's behalf to King David, as recorded in 2 Samuel 7:12-16:

"When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."

This is no limited Messianic expectation, no suggestion of duration of reign. Jesus is in no way proscribed by Jacob's physical line or even by the theocracy of David's throne over Israel. Jesus' reign will fulfill everything intended there, but it is going to continue on in scope and duration forever and ever. All of these Messianic expectations are clearly portrayed in the Old Testament. Now, Gabriel is saying to Mary, "Your baby boy will incarnate all of this godly Messiah personhood. He is the Savior of the world, and he is the Lord of Life."

I hope this reality, if nothing else, grips your heart in these six weeks before Christmas. This is the time of year when non-Christians are sensitized to spiritual reality. They love the story of the baby in the manger, the lowing cattle, the angel choirs, etc. They are attracted to a little one who somehow represents peace and love. What the world desperately needs to see, and they can only see it through us as God gives us boldness, sensitivity and passion, is that this little one grew up to die for the sins of the world. He can forgive those sins that make people so sick inside. They have got to see him as the one who has authority over their life whether they realize it or not. I would challenge all of us to boldness, to sensitivity, in these remaining weeks before Christmas. Let us ask God to give us opportunities to introduce people to this one whom the angel Gabriel reveals so clearly.

Mary's response to the word of the angel is one of puzzlement. Verse 34:

And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?"

Again, her question is very different than the disbelieving challenge of Zechariah. Mary's concern is one of honest intellectual questioning. There is a transparent simplicity, a guilelessness in her question. She is almost blunt. She is not responding theologically, but pragmatically. "I've never had sexual intercourse. Women don't get pregnant without a man impregnating them. How can this happen?" she asks. It is fascinating to think that despite all the theological volumes that have been written about this, and all the debating that has gone on over the virgin birth, Mary herself is the first one to raise the issue, without any false delicacy. "How can this thing be?"

In response to her question, the angel describes a miraculous conception. Verses 35-37.

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will over shadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible."

He respond to Mary's question with beautiful poetry, describing God's mysterious provision for conception in the womb of a virgin. First, he deals with the biological issue. There is beautiful parallelism in the first part of verse 32. He says that the power of the Holy Spirit of God will come upon Mary, will overshadow her, literally, will envelop her--the creative power of God operative in Mary's life. There is no overt sexual imagery here. It is sensitively stated, with reverent reserve. Yet there is the clear statement of divine activity resulting in conception.

The last phrase in verse 35 deals with a question that Mary did not ask. The angel says, "Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." He announces to Mary that this Jesus, as a result of his divinely instituted life, his supernatural conception, will be called "holy," perfect, free from all taint of sin.

There are two important things held in tension in verse 35 that are difficult to understand. He says, first, that it is necessary for the Savior of the world to be born of a woman, of humankind, so that he would be of the same nature as those whom he came to save. That is the import of the Apostle Paul's words in Galatians 4:4, 5: "But when the time had fully 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."

But it was just as imperative that he should be holy, sinless, and blameless, since the scriptures teach clearly that no sinful being can accomplish reconciliation or redemption for others. The words of the psalmist underscore that truth in Psalm 49, verse 7: "Truly no man can ransom himself, or give to God the price of his life."

In this one verse, Gabriel is making clear the glorious fact that both of these requirements will be fulfilled in the life of Jesus. He is fully man, yet fully God. Here the mystery of the incarnation, the virgin birth, the immaculate conception, are held in tension. C.S. Lewis could write with penetrating insight, "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God." That is the miracle of Christmas: "that we might receive adoption as sons."

In verse 6, the angel explains that God's power has already been evidenced in the life of Mary's elderly cousin Elizabeth, who is already six months pregnant. God is not restricted to the natural order. He is totally free to do the extraordinary. Here the angel is saying to Mary that Elizabeth's own miracle will help convince and strengthen her in her own struggle to believe, to understand, to absorb this.

Verse 37 is really a summary, a benediction, the bottom line, if you will, of all that he has been saying to Mary: "For with God nothing will be impossible." Literally, "For no word from God shall be void of power." That idea of God speaking and things happening takes us clear back to Genesis, to the Creator God who spoke reality into being, who spoke the first Adam into existence. That creative action is now continuing as the word of God speaks Jesus, the second Adam, into our space-time reality. God can, and God will, do anything that he determines. That is the point of Gabriel's final word to Mary.

Before we rush to see Mary's third and final response, let us examine the reality of what would happen if she submitted to God's will for her life. First of all, she would be a pregnant, unmarried teenager with no idea of how her family, her friends, how the community in which she had grown up would respond. We have already seen that Joseph, her fiancée, is a man of justice and fairness. Actually, Matthew tells us that Joseph did indeed think about divorcing her, "about "putting her away" quietly. The punishment (the death penalty as described in Deuteronomy 22) for adultery does not seem to have been carried out too often in those days, but it was still religious law and it had great import. Mary could not know what kind of rejection, humiliation, physical suffering, perhaps even death which she might have to endure if she chose to respond in obedience to this word from the

Lord.

There needs to be a great long pause between verses 37 and 38. Frederich Buechner, in his wonderful biographical dictionary of biblical characters entitled *Peculiar Treasures*, describes that moment between verse 37 and verse 38 as the angel Gabriel waits for the answer of Mary. This, by the way, is a wonderful, whimsical and creative book. We need imagination for this moment now. Listen to these words:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said. And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.

But this girl, this Galilean teenager, responds with an obedient act of submission, of surrender. Look at her words to the angel, in verse 38:

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Her response establishes two things. First, she is accepting voluntary slavery. She has identified herself as "the handmaid of the Lord," literally, a slave girl, entering into a relationship of abject submission. Slavery knows no rights of ownership. She is the property of the God who created her, the God who prepared her for this moment, and now the God who calls her to a saving purpose.

Secondly, her answer shows obedience to revealed truth. She says, "According to your word let it be to me." It is not the experience of the angelic appearance that grips Mary. There is no spiritual rush, no emotional ecstasy because she is in the presence of an angel. No, hers is a thoughtful, obedient response to God's revelation through Gabriel. Mary believed God, in single-minded, unwavering commitment. That is the response God wants from all of his daughters and sons. Mary holds nothing back. There is radical commitment. She belongs to God. She trusts him. She allows his wise and loving plan to be accomplished in her life.

If any story deserves to be included in Stephen Spielberg's anthology of *Amazing Stories*, this one most certainly does. In it we are confronted with the supernatural, with the mysterious. We must not be too quick to try to unravel that mystery. The story demands response as well.

We have been confronted in this passage with a God who takes insignificant places, insignificant people, and graces them with his blessing, with his usefulness. Do you feel insignificant? Do you ever wonder if God can use you, if anybody even knows who you are? The truth of this revelation is: there are no insignificant people. God is looking for obedient, not important people. He will take your life and use it for his purpose as he did Zechariah and Elizabeth, and as he did with Mary.

We have been confronted with a God who offers salvation from sin through his Son, who offers the privilege of the Lordship of Jesus over all of life. I would ask, have you experienced that relationship, that reality in your life, or are you sin-sick in your soul? Do you live with guilt, with dread and fear? Jesus came to take all that away. He can forgive your sins. He is available this morning to do exactly that, and to take control of your life, to lead and guide, reigning and ruling in your heart.

We have been confronted with a God who fills the womb of a virgin with a Messiah baby, and with a God who allows us, today, the spiritual reality of being filled full with the life of the resurrected Lord Jesus. Certainly, as Mary carried Jesus in her womb, he can be resident in our life. She is called "blessed of women." We are all the more blessed because Jesus can live his life through us.

We have been confronted with a God who delighted in the obedient submission of his daughter, Miriam, and a

God who calls us to take him at his word, with the same radical submission--ready to submit in faith--to the wonder God has in store for us and our place in that wonder. Do not miss the thrill of it!

Our Father, there is a sense in which we are speechless before you. Our hearts have been challenged, convicted, even shocked. We struggle with this word. Can it mean what it says? Thank you for your self-revelation. We ask you to minister to each of us at the specific point of need in our lives. Take these words through the power of your Spirit and burn them into each of our hearts. Continue in these weeks to prepare us so that when Christmas comes we, as individuals and families, will be able to celebrate and rejoice before you, with clear understanding and with hearts that are ready. We ask all of these things because of Jesus, and in His name. Amen.

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