

# The Three Heroes of Christmas

## Mary \* Luke 1:26-38

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Luke 1. Today we are going to continue in our short series on the three heroes of Christmas. Last Sunday we talked about Joseph, on Tuesday night during our Christmas Eve service we will talk about Jesus, and today we are going to focus on Mary.

Now, you probably realize that other than Jesus Himself there is no more controversial figure in the Bible than Mary. This controversy is multi-faceted and comes from doctrinal errors and misunderstandings both inside and outside of the church, and to be honest with you it makes this message a delicate one to preach. That being the case I would ask you to pray that I will speak the truth in love this morning, and those who disagree with what I say will feel loved by the way in which I say it.

That being said, I have two primary goals for this message. The first is to go to the Scriptures to get a clear picture of what it teaches about this important woman. Listen to me closely here. Virtually all of the controversy about Mary comes from a failure to trust either the inerrancy or the sufficiency of Scripture. By this I mean that on the one hand there are those who really struggle with what the Bible teaches, and then there are others who go far beyond what it teaches. However, here at Harmony Bible Church we believe that this book is inerrant, meaning that it always tells the truth, and it is sufficient, meaning that it reveals everything so that we can know God and faithfully follow Him. And I really can't stress how important these two things are for what we are going to talk about today. So, the first goal is to get a clear picture of what the Bible teaches about Mary.

My second goal for the message is to set out a few things that Mary herself can teach us. One of the many unfortunate consequences of all the controversy around Mary is that we can easily neglect some of the most important things we can learn from her. And as we saw from Joseph last week, there is much she has to teach us. She truly is one of the great heroes of our faith.

All right, let's read our passage for today, Luke 1:26-38:

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, **27** to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" **29** But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. **30** And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** 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, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." **34** And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" **35** And the angel answered her, "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. **36** 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. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God." **38** And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*

*(Luke 1:26-38, ESV)*

### **Three Essential Truths About Mary**

From this passage I want to point out three essential truths about Mary.

#### **1. Mary was a virgin.**

Number one, Mary was a virgin. Now, I recognize that this probably seems obvious as Luke uses the term three times in this passage, and we saw it in Matthew 1 last week as well. However, there are few doctrines in Scripture that have been more disputed than the virgin birth. Because of this, everybody needs to sit up and pay attention, because the virgin birth is an

essential doctrine of our faith. Donald Macleod in his book *The Person of Christ* explains it this way:

*The virgin birth is posted on guard at the door of the mystery of Christmas; and none of us must think of hurrying past it. It stands on the threshold of the New Testament, blatantly supernatural, defying our rationalism, informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself and that if we find it offensive there is no point in proceeding further.<sup>1</sup>*

Now, there are two primary arguments against the virgin birth. And I am going to get a little technical with you this morning, but this issue demands it. Some dispute the virgin birth by arguing that the word for *virgin* should be translated “young woman” because that is one way for the Hebrew word *almah* to be translated. Last week Matthew told us that the virgin birth was a fulfillment of a prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. In that passage the word for virgin is *almah*, which leads some to say that the Bible doesn’t teach that Mary was a virgin. However, a good case can be made that *almah* is always used in reference to a young woman who is a virgin. More importantly the Greek word that Matthew and Luke use for *virgin* is *parthenos*, which always means “virgin.” So did you get that? The Holy Spirit inspired Matthew and Luke to use the word that would make it clear that Mary was a virgin.

From a logical standpoint it would be strange for Mary to say to the angel in verse 34, “How will this be, since I am a ‘young woman’”? Does being a young woman preclude her from being pregnant? No, it’s the fact that she knows she is a virgin that leads her to ask that specific question. If Mary isn’t a virgin the whole line of reasoning falls apart here. If she were sleeping around she probably wouldn’t have been surprised that the angel was telling her she was pregnant. Now, I know you might find that crass, but that is exactly what those who argue against Mary being a virgin are saying.

The other argument against the virgin birth is that it is impossible. So I want to ask you: how do we respond to this argument? I would suggest that we respond by agreeing. Mary certainly does. When the angel tells her she is

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<sup>1</sup> Macleod, Donald (1998). Pg 37. *The Person of Christ*. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois.

going to conceive she essentially says, "That's not possible." But look with me at verse 37. This is perhaps the most important verse in the entire passage. The angel responds to Mary by saying, "For nothing is impossible with God."

Listen to me here. This is crucial. The virgin birth is impossible, and that's a good thing because nothing possible can save us. As the poet W.H. Auden once wrote, *"Nothing that is possible can save us/We who must die demand a miracle."*<sup>2</sup>

One of the undeniable axioms of human existence is that we all die, and our only hope of rescue from this reality is a miracle – something that's impossible, something that we cannot produce on our own. And that, my friends is what Christmas is all about. It's about a miraculous birth that rescues us from an inevitable death.

You know, I think there is an additional application here. One of the things that the virgin birth reminds us of is that God is the God of the impossible. I am sure there are many of us here today who are experiencing impossible situations. We are experiencing things that are beyond our control and way too big for us. If this is you today, recognize that in the virgin birth of Jesus there is hope. As Tullian Tchividjian wrote this week, "The impossible problems of this life have found their impossible answer in him." In other words, if God can do the impossible of becoming a man through a virgin, than He very well can help us with whatever impossible problem we are facing. So, listen. Jesus is the answer to the impossible situation you are facing right now. That's what the virgin birth is all about.

Now, while we are here I want to take a few moments to talk about why the virgin birth is so important. I mean, why does it really matter anyways? Here is the answer: the virgin birth is important because it made it possible for Jesus to be both fully God and fully man in one person.

Look closely with me at verse 35. Gabriel says to Mary:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tullian/2013/12/16/nothing-that-is-possible-can-save-us/>

*“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.”*

In the virgin birth, the pre-existent Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the One who is co-equal with God the Father and God the Spirit, took on human flesh and became a baby in the womb of a teenager.

This is something the New Testament teaches over and over again. It teaches that the baby conceived in Mary is also the Son of God. And He is not just part God and part man, or sometimes God and sometimes man, but since the virgin birth He has and always will be both fully God and fully man in one person. There are many passages I could point you to here, but let me just refer to one that clearly lays this out. Romans 1:1-4:

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, **2** which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, **3** concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh **4** and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 1:1-4, ESV)*

Now, let’s dig a little deeper and talk about the significance of Jesus being both fully God and fully man in one person. I know, we are going kind of deep today, but that’s good, right?

Jesus has to be human because we need a human to die in our place and take the penalty for our sins. Hebrews 2:17:

*Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:17, ESV)*

Jesus has to be fully human – *like his brothers in every respect* – because God required a man to turn aside His wrath against our sin.

At the same time, Jesus also has to be divine because the only sacrifice God would accept is a completely perfect and holy one. This is what the angel is telling Mary in verse 35 when he says that the child will be called holy. He will be the holy Son of God, the only who can be the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

And so I hope you see what is at stake here. If Jesus wasn't conceived and born of a virgin, then He was conceived and born just like you and me. And if He is just like you and me, then He is not God and is a sinner with the same problem that we have. On the other hand, if He is not a man then He can't represent us before God. This ultimately means that we are still dead in our sins and in need of another savior, a savior that is nowhere to be found. If Jesus isn't fully God and fully man, than Christmas is meaningless and we have nothing to celebrate this week.

But thankfully Jesus was born of a virgin, which allows Him to be at the same time both fully man and fully God and therefore the one and only who can save us from our sins and give us a great reason to celebrate this week.

All right, so we spent a lot of time on the fact that Mary was a virgin. Let's move on now and look at two more essential truths about her in a timelier manner.

## **2. Mary was a sinner in need of a savior (just like you and me).**

Number two, Mary was a sinner in need of a savior - just like you and me. This point, of course, is contrary to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which in it's dogma of the *Immaculate Conception* states that Mary was miraculously conceived in the womb of her mother in a way that kept her from inheriting a sin nature.

However, I want to share with you four pieces of Biblical evidence that show that Mary was a sinner just like you and me. Before I do however, let me say that if you are a Catholic, or come from a Catholic background, or have family that is Catholic, this is not meant as an attack. I simply want to lay out for you what the Bible has to say on this matter and then give you a couple of important things to think about. If you disagree or have concerns about what and/or how I present this I'd love to sit down and talk with you more sometime in the days ahead.

The first piece of evidence that Mary was a sinner comes from verses 28-30 of our passage. Look at them with me.

*And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"  
**29** But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. **30** And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."*

The word *favored* in verse 28 can also be translated *graced*, which is not a bad translation unless you interpret it to mean that Mary is the one who dispenses grace rather than the one who has received it. And this is what Gabriel means; he is saying that Mary has received the grace of being chosen to be the mother of Jesus. It's quite clear just a few verses later that this is how Mary understood the transaction.

This leads to the second piece of evidence in verses 46-47, which are the beginning of what is known as the *Magnificat*, Mary's song of praise. Look at them with me:

*And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."*

Mary calls God her Savior, which would have been completely unnecessary if she had been sinless. In fact, in order to claim that Mary was sinless, you have to admit that she apparently did not understand this herself, because

as these verses and the ones to follow show, she was eagerly anticipating both a national and a personal savior.

The third piece of evidence that Mary was a sinner comes from Luke 2. I'm not going to have you turn there, but verses 22-24 tell us that forty days after Jesus' birth Mary went to the temple to be purified as commanded in Leviticus 12. However, if Mary were sinless she would not have been unclean and therefore would not have needed to make an offering for purification.

Fourth and perhaps the best evidence that Mary was a sinner is the clear teaching of Romans 3.

*For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:22-23, ESV)*

The only exception for this in Scripture is Jesus Himself, and so the *all* here includes Mary.

Now, let me give you two application points here, one about Mary and one about us. The first is that Mary isn't divine and therefore should not be worshipped as such. As I will talk about in just a minute, we should honor her and look up to her for her godliness, but we must be careful not to come anywhere close to worshipping her as God. 1 Timothy 2:5 states it well:

*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5, ESV)*

There is only one God to worship, and there is only one way to worship Him, and that is through Jesus Christ his Son.

The second application point is that we need to recognize we are all sinners in need of a savior. In fact, that is what the birth passages in Matthew and Luke scream to us. When we read the birth stories of Jesus the primary



thing we should get from them is that Jesus has come to save us. I need to read the passages and realize that Jesus came to save me! If you are here today and have never trusted in Jesus as your Savior; if Christmas to you is normally just a great holiday filled with family, food and presents, than please see right here and right now that it is really about the fact that the Son of God became a man so that He could one day die on a cross to save you from your sins and give you eternal life. That's what Christmas is about.

### **3. Mary was godly.**

Ok, so far we have learned that Mary was a virgin and that Mary was a sinner. These are two essential truths for us to understand. But there is one more we need to wrestle with, and that is that Mary was godly. Although Mary wasn't and isn't God, she was godly, and there is a lot that we can learn from her on this front. In fact, let me say this. Mary very well may be the godliest example we have in all of Scripture. If you want to model your life after a Biblical character, there really is no one better to choose than Mary. The problem, however, is that we have a tendency to either make too much or too little of her. So instead of worshiping or ignoring her, let's see what she can teach us about what it truly means to be godly.

To do so let's look at four things which display her godliness.

- **Purity**

First, Mary was pure. Although she wasn't sinless, she did enter into marriage sexually pure. The reason I point this out is that while in Mary's day this may have been the norm, in our day it is the exception. And I wish that I could say this wasn't the case in the church, but unfortunately my experience tells me that it is. So please listen to me brothers and sisters. Mary entered into her marriage as a virgin, and that is what God desires for all of us. I realize that this is completely foreign to what our culture promotes, but there is no mistaking that it is what God's Word teaches. 1 Thessalonians states it clearly:

*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; **4** that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, ESV)*

Now married folks, please don't nod your head and agree with this and fail to recognize that this applies to you as well. God's desire is for us to be pure inside and outside of marriage.

All that said; if you have sinned in this area, either before or in marriage, please know that Jesus came so that you could be forgiven of your impurity. And if you will repent of your sin and ask Him to forgive you, He will be faithful and just to forgive your sin and cleanse you from your unrighteousness. That, by the way is what baptism symbolizes. You saw the shirts that our baptizees today were wearing. Do you remember what they said? Clean! Because when we repent Jesus washes our sins away.

- **Humility**

The second thing that displays Mary's godliness is her humility. Look at verses 46-48 again:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, **47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, **48** for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant."*

You know, if Mary lived today we would half expect her to say, "Well, of course He chose me. I am pretty much the godliest woman around." That's because today boasting and self-promotion are expected and seemingly necessary if you want to get ahead. And if anyone has ever had a reason to boast, Mary certainly did. I mean she was one of a kind. There was and will only be one mother of Jesus.

However, it's clear from verse 48 that Mary recognizes she was chosen not because of anything within her, but only because of God's grace. She is genuinely amazed and overwhelmed by the fact that God would choose someone like her for such an incredible role. And there is a very important

truth in this that is weaved all throughout Scripture. In the words of the Apostle James:

*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. (James 4:6, ESV)*

In other words, the only ones who can receive grace are the ones who are humble enough to recognize they need it. How about you? Are you humble enough to recognize your need for God's grace? Do you understand that there is nothing in you that is deserving of His favor? Have you humbly submitted your life to Him? Those who desire grace must first admit that they need it.

- **Obedience**

The third thing that displays Mary's godliness is her obedience. Now, we talked about obedience a great deal last week so I won't camp out here. But I do want to point you to v. 38. After the angel explains to her what is going to happen, Mary responds:

*"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*

In other words, this is amazing, this is overwhelming, I am not sure what to do about all of this, but ok Lord, I am here to serve and so whatever you want me to do, I am going to do. One of primary things that make Mary and Joseph heroes is that they recognized they existed to serve the Lord and so when he asked them to do something, they did it. By the way, that is what a true hero is. A true hero is someone who does what God asks them to do.

And so I want to ask you, church – how about us? Do we realize that we exist to serve God? Do we understand that He created and redeemed us for His good purposes? Will we respond like Mary and Joseph and be obedient to what He has called us to do? Will we be heroes like they are?

- **Worship**

Ok, one more. The fourth thing that displays Mary's godliness is her worship. For this, let's read verses 46-55:

*And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, **47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, **48** for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; **49** for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. **50** And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. **51** He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; **52** he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; **53** he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. **54** He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, **55** as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." (Luke 1:46-55, ESV)*

This song of praise is called the *Magnificat* because in it Mary greatly magnifies, i.e., worships the Lord. What's interesting however is that the tense of the word *magnifies* indicates that this wasn't a one time event for Mary but rather her way of life. Mary understood that all of life is worship.

This is reflected in how well she knew the Scriptures. In her song she alludes to passages from all over the Old Testament, including the Pentateuch, the Psalms and the Prophets. Now, this might not sound all that significant unless you remember the context here a little bit. Last week I told you that Mary was likely only 12-13 years old. What's more, she would not have had access to any written copies of the Scriptures. Not even one. Her only access would have been through attendance at the synagogue or from hearing her parents recite these passages. She didn't have a Bible, she didn't have an iPod, and she never went to AWANA. And yet she is able to spontaneously quote passage after passage and blend them together into a beautiful song of praise to God. Apparently she regularly pondered in her heart what she heard. She was continually going over Scripture in her mind.

What's more, she allowed the Scriptures to focus her on Jesus. A majority of the passages Mary quotes here are prophecies about the Messiah. Get this.

Mary was expectantly praying and looking for Jesus to come, and when she found out that He was coming, and through her no less, it lead her to burst forth in praise.

And brothers and sisters the same should be true for us. We should be regularly meditating on Scripture and allowing it to point us to Jesus. So much so that when we are reminded that He has come and is coming again, it just naturally leads us to burst forth in praise.

Let me make a specific application to this time of year. Christmas should lead us to worship. We should be saturating our lives in Scripture so that when this time of year comes around we should just randomly burst forth in praise. As my favorite Christmas carol goes, "Joy to the world". Why? Because "the Lord has come."

And so let's be like Mary. Let's be pure, let's be humble, let's be obedient, and most of all let's continually be worshipping and looking for Jesus' to come.

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