

# Luke 1

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Date: 15 December 2019

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're carrying on looking at the opening chapters of Luke this morning. Last week we looked at Zechariah didn't we? And as we look at Mary this morning, like with Zechariah last Sunday, we see another one of Luke's sort of diversions off of the events and the happenings into a personal story of faith.

Of people dealing with extraordinary announcements of God doing extraordinary things, of miracles, of pregnancy and old age for Zechariah and his wife, and now a virgin birth and pregnancy.

And Luke places Mary's story next to Zechariah, who we saw earlier, because they are two very, very similar stories, but they are not the same.

And the slight difference between them is the point that Luke wants to make this morning. And they are similar, Zechariah and Mary, because both of them seem to have shades of doubt in what the angels announced, don't they?

They both ask questions. Do you remember? Zechariah asks the question back in verse 18, how shall I know this? And Mary asks a similar question in verse 34, how shall this be since I am a virgin?

[ 1 : 26 ] So they are similar, and they both have questions and doubts, I guess, but they are not the same. Because last Sunday morning we saw that Gabriel rebuked Zechariah for his question, but Mary doesn't get rebuked for her, does she?

Her question, she receives honour. Elizabeth says, verse 45, blessed is she who believed what was spoken to her would be fulfilled.

Mary, by contrast, is held up as a model to us of how to respond to God. She's a model of faith. Both of them have their doubts and their questions, but between them there are different kinds of doubts.

There are different ways of questioning God. Doubt is nuanced by Luke. It's not a black and white thing. There is one way of doubting God that he disapproves of, and another that he is gentle and patient and kind and honours.

We all have doubts, don't we? We all have questions. But the question is, which sort of doubts do we have? Luke wants us to question our questions this morning.

[ 2 : 47 ] So let's dive in and see the subtle contrast between these two characters. And think to yourself, which one am I most like? Think, I need to question my questions.

What makes Mary's questions different? Well, three moments in her story. First of all, see her simple acceptance. See her simple acceptance.

If you look closely at the questions that Zechariah and Mary ask, there is a subtle difference between them. Back in verse 18, look very closely at his question.

How shall I know this? Your barren wife is going to have a child. How shall I know this?

Zechariah asks for a proof of what has been promised. He wants a confirmation. He wants a sign that this miracle is going to happen at all.

[ 3 : 47 ] At what sign will you give me? How will I know that this is going to happen, he says. What evidence are you going to give me? There is a sense, isn't there, that his doubt is in the event itself actually happening.

He questions the credibility of God's words, of the miracle. Whereas Mary asks something subtly different, verse 34.

How will this be? Since I'm a virgin. Zechariah, how will I know it? Mary, how will it happen?

See, Mary wonders at the mystery of the mechanics, of the how. But not that the miracle will actually happen. She's not married.

She's never been with a man. So, how will I get pregnant? But in the question, there is this underlying sense of acceptance. She may not understand how.

[ 4 : 51 ] There are unknowns about how this is going to happen. But she is willing to accept that it will happen. And she doesn't ask for a proof that it will happen. Even if she hasn't got the foggiest clue how.

She says, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be according to your word. She does want an explanation how though. And the angel is willing to give it.

The miracle is not inexplicable. There is an answer to the hard question. And the angel says, verse 35, It will be the work and power of the Holy Spirit coming on you.

Let's break that down a little bit. What is the angel saying? Well, one of Mary's eggs will be fertilised. And there will be a real human conception.

But there will be no male sperm. The egg will be miraculously fertilised. How? By the power of the Holy Spirit.

[ 5 : 57 ] Mary's half of DNA and chromosomes will be used in the usual way. An enormous kind of conception from her point of view. And this baby will be conceived in her womb.

But somehow the rest will be done by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the angel says, nothing will be impossible with God. It will be the power of the Holy Spirit. And that is the explanation the angel gives.

The angel allows the question and gives an answer. The Holy Spirit. Is that crystal clear, Mary?

Any questions? The problem with that answer, or for some people, is that it could just raise more questions, couldn't it? Hang on a minute, hang on.

Before you go, what do you mean by the power of the Holy Spirit? How is the Holy Spirit going to do that? What actually will happen on a microscopic level?

[ 7 : 01 ] How will the Holy Spirit fertilise my egg? How will this conception happen? See, the answer to the first how question just releases a wave of more how questions, doesn't it?

But Mary doesn't ask those how questions. There comes a point where Mary stops asking how and she accepts how.

That is the explanation she gets. It's the Holy Spirit, Mary. It's not a gullible acceptance, though.

Don't think that. We know that Mary actually is a very deep thinker.

She's the kind of person who mulls things over. She thinks about things a lot. We read elsewhere in the Gospels that Mary pondered the words that she heard. She took them into her heart.

She pondered them. She thought about them. Here in verse 29, when the angel first greets her, she tries to discern what kind of greeting this was. You could translate that as she examines these words.

[ 8 : 08 ] She took stock. She took a step back. She tried to ponder what this greeting was. Mary was a thinker. She wasn't a stupid, gullible, impressionable teenager.

She was the kind of woman who asked, what on earth is going on here? Am I seeing things? Is this real? She's actually a very rational woman. But for Mary, the rational, intelligent thinking person, she knows that her rational thinking has a limit.

And for her, nothing more is necessary than to just know that nothing with God is impossible and it will be the power of the Holy Spirit.

She doesn't say to the angel, oh, I get it now. I totally understand how this is going to work. I'm totally convinced that it will all be easy and wonderful and I get it completely.

Of course not. She doesn't know everything. There are lots more how questions to be asked. But she knows enough. She would have known about the Spirit of God as a devout Jew through the Bible that she had and his immense power that he was there in creation and he created something out of nothing.

[ 9 : 30 ] That he's worked in the history of God's people. That he's brought life from the dead. That this is the kind of power that this Holy Spirit has. That he has. So she does know enough.

And so there can be a simple acceptance. Because as soon as you mention the power of the Holy Spirit she knows, whoa, I'm out of my depth here. And although she knows to use a rational mind and although we should do that too, being a Christian does not mean throwing your brain in the bin and just being impressionable but being a Christian means that we realise that God is bigger than our brains.

God's work and his miraculous work is bigger than our thinking can grasp. And Mary realises that. And so she just says I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be according to your word. It's basically saying, Amen, even though I do not get it. God doesn't expect us to submit our faith to him without reason and without explanation.

But often God's explanation will push the limits of our minds, won't it? And of our reason. Nothing will be impossible with God.

[10:52] It will be the power of the Holy Spirit. And the limits of our mind mean that she will not be able to understand all of the hard questions. The work of the Holy Spirit who is God bursting the boundaries of our human understanding.

And often when we ask God how the answer just gives us more questions. Because our minds and our human limited thinking can never be enough to contain the power of the Holy Spirit.

We just can't do that. And if we could then he wouldn't be God, would he? A virgin birth? How will the Holy Spirit do this?

Let me tell you the answer this morning. I just haven't got a clue. None of us have. It's not that we're stupid.

It's just that God is infinitely more intelligent than us. It would be like trying to explain particle physics to an ant, wouldn't it? This is the God of the Bible who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one God who can be accepted and believed by a simple child and trusted in by the most simple of the people and yet the most deeply thinking theologians are dwarfed by the profundity of who he is and what he can do.

[12:14] And when someone hears the gospel and asks that question how can this be actually you can be sure you've heard the gospel properly. There is a sense where if we don't ask that question at all we haven't really heard the gospel fully or we've just forgotten it or it hasn't been explained fully.

If we find the God of the Bible just a little bit impossible or inconceivable or even ridiculous of a just God who forgives wicked people of a holy God who comes to dwell with sinful people of dead people coming back to life of a God who became a man to die for wicked people so that they could know him forever there is something hugely mysterious about that.

hugely perplexing about the whole thing deeply mysterious. There should be this sense where we ask God how in everything that he does there is something healthy in those kind of questions to understand the magnitude of his power the Holy Spirit that there must be those sort of questions from us doesn't there as creatures?

And yet we can simply accept that we can't understand it all and we can't keep asking how and ever get to the point where the questions will stop.

That is why God is worth knowing and worshipping and asking about that there are always more depths to his character and his work to dive into deeper and deeper.

[13:52] and so we have got to come to a point like Mary where we humbly just settle down and accept that we are not God and that we are not as clever as him and we are not as powerful as the Holy Spirit and like Mary say oh the power of the Spirit well that is enough then.

And so this thinking woman Mary is the model in that simple faith in that simple acceptance. acceptance. And secondly though she has an active obedience.

She has an active obedience. The thing with Mary is that she turns acceptance into action. I'm the Lord's servant she says and she she arises with haste verse 39 and goes to the hill country and to Zechariah and Elizabeth's house.

She acts she does something. And because it is one thing to agree with God's word but it's another to act upon it. And Mary shows us that the root of belief is obedience.

This isn't just some intellectual assent to what the angel says. It is an entire surrender to what the angel has said. Just think what that would have meant for her.

[15:13] Accepting and obeying God's plan. it will mean something extremely difficult for her actually. It could mean a lifetime of embarrassment and of stigma as the woman who in that conservative society had a child out of wedlock.

She could become a social outcast as she brings this child into that sort of world. And think for her plans of life with Joseph. She would have been like any other young woman who was engaged to be married.

She maybe imagined setting up the family home, didn't she? She had plans maybe they could have kids two, three, maybe four. Joseph runs the family business. She probably had it all mapped out. And now suddenly all of that has to change. And she's plunged into the unknown where life feels like there are just more questions than there are answers.

And it could have been so hard for her to believe because it was going to be so hard to obey. She might not get it all.

[ 16 : 21 ] She may not even like it all. But she does it. Whatever comes, she says to the angel, I accept it. And I can put all of my plans and all of my hopes aside since this is God's will.

And Mary shows that belief is tied to obedience. But on the flip side she shows us as well that the problem with disbelief is disobedience.

And often people don't believe God's word and the gospel because they don't want to obey the gospel. The philosopher Blaise Pascal said that in faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don't.

As long as you don't want to obey God you'll find shadows. You'll find shadows in all that goes on this morning if you want to. You'll find shadows in every conversation that you have with someone who believes.

shadows. You'll find shadows if you want them to be there in every part of the Bible. You'll be looking for shadows all of the time. Maybe you've met people like that.

[ 17 : 45 ] They major on the unknowns as if they are an excuse not to act and obey. You just keep saying well I've just got more questions.

But our problem in that is that we could be waiting too long before we obey. You say you've got questions you've got doubts you're just looking into it you're just investigating but some of us have just been doing that for far too long.

But you won't do anything and you won't move anywhere until you feel you've been satisfied with all your answers and all of your doubts and you want it all so you're holding back from obeying the Lord Jesus.

But let me tell you this morning having questions and doubts does not set you apart from anyone else in this room. having questions is no reason not to believe and obey.

It is no excuse. It wasn't for Mary. Your disbelief actually with all due respect it is because of disobedience.

[ 18 : 51 ] It's an unwillingness to say to God I'm your servant. And you don't want to do that because you'll have to let go of your control.

But others of you you've maybe got questions and even doubts but you want to move forward and you want to obey. You've got no idea how God is going to do the things that he's promised he's going to do in your life.

You don't know the hows. There are still lots of questions but the alternatives to the Lord Jesus are far less credible in the world and around the world and you've been with his people for long enough to know that there is something different about the Lord Jesus his people and so you're willing to go with it.

Even if you don't understand it all entirely. What I'm trying to say is that in this room there is a whole spectrum isn't there of belief and of faith.

And what we realise here Luke shows us that some can doubt with an open mind and others can doubt with a closed mind. And Mary has the right kind of doubts and questions because even though she has questions she still obeys and she's willing to let go of control of her life.

[ 20 : 14 ] She doesn't know everything but she knows enough. It's the power of the Holy Spirit and she's willing to act on it. Some people doubt asking questions like her.

Some people doubt closing off the possibility of answers. And you're always looking for shadows but it's disobedience really. C.S.

Lewis in his book *The Great Divorce* pictures a conversation between a believer and a non-believer and one guy he's a disbeliever says to the other for me there is no such thing as a final answer.

The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through the mind must it not. Just keep asking questions. He says on the journey of faith to travel is better than to arrive.

In other words it is better to be sceptical forever. Don't act don't believe don't move forwards don't trust just hold back and keep asking questions.

[ 21 : 21 ] that is better. And actually that is kind of the modern way isn't it? That's the virtuous way. The second replies there was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers and you were glad when you found them.

It was when you were a child. So become that child again even now. The disbelievers said ah but when I became a man I put away childish things.

asking questions because you wanted answers. There is something wonderfully simple about that isn't there and honest and sincere about that and almost childlike innocence in that.

And God honours those kind of questions. But there is a pride at work when we stop that. And actually in Christian faith there comes a point and with Mary we have got to know when the asking just has to lead to acting finally.

That whatever God sends my way it is best and I surrender to him. And I don't understand all of it I may not even agree with it all but I will do it because he knows best.

[ 22 : 40 ] Come what may in all the unknowns and in all the fearful things that God may be asking me to walk into that God calls us to maybe of even losing status and of being thought of in the wrong way just like Mary you don't have to understand it all fully and we're fools if we say we can understand it all fully.

You don't even have to like it all fully yet. You just have to obey it. Simple acceptance and an act of obedience and then thirdly and lastly a wonderful assurance a wonderful assurance and this is when Mary goes to see Elizabeth and what Mary does is she acts upon the angel's words and she goes to the place where she can get assurance of this news.

If she goes to see Elizabeth she will get confirmation won't she either way that the angel is real and has told her the truth.

So this visit to Elizabeth is a means of assurance for her assurance of faith. Seeing Elizabeth will build up Mary's faith and help her in her doubts.

So Mary acts and she goes there. She avails herself of the means of assurance and Elizabeth confirms this faith. She confirms what the angel has said.

[ 24 : 07 ] If you look at verse 42 and verse 43 Elizabeth says blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

Now as far as we know Elizabeth has not heard about this before Mary gets there. And Luke shows us in the timings there's been no gap of time that Mary receives the announcement and then goes to visit Elizabeth.

So independently by some God given prophetic knowledge Elizabeth tells Mary what Mary has gone to tell Elizabeth.

And what a boost that was to Mary's faith. That God has told the same thing to somebody else. This wasn't a hallucination it wasn't a dream it is real.

And Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy just like the angel says what a boost to her faith. And she really needed that. As stupid and flimsy and weak as she may have felt to go to Elizabeth and tell her this news she went to the right place where she could get confirmation and she took a risk in a way.

[ 25 : 25 ] And in her obedience even in the unknown she receives a huge blessing of assurance. And if we're like Mary if we're struggling with the unknowns and with questions and even with doubts but we want to know answers and we want assurance this is how God deals with us isn't it?

When we are sincerely seeking assurance the Lord knows the strains that his word has on our minds at times.

this would have been a huge psychological strain for Mary to get her head around this. And the Lord knows that our minds and our human thinking can't understand it all like he does.

He knows that we're dust. But when we come to him and we go to the places that he's arranged to assure us then he longs to boost our faith.

When we obey him he assures us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that only he who believes is obedient but only he who is obedient believes.

[ 26 : 43 ] It's interesting that isn't it? The more we obey and act and move on what we know as little as it may feel that we know the more God assures and strengthens our faith.

he who is obedient believes when you start acting he will start assuring more and more and when we step out into the unknown he is there waiting to boost our faith.

There's a story of a king who went into a village to see his subjects and he met a beggar sitting by the roadside and when the king came along he held out his bowl for a generous gift from the king but the beggar was shocked when instead the king asked the beggar for something so the beggar reluctantly gave the king three grains of rice at the end of the day the beggar looked in his bowl to look at his takings and right at the bottom of his bowl he noticed three grains of pure gold the king had marked his obedience with blessing the beggar said to himself oh if only I had given him it all Mary's story shows us that he is a God who is gentle and he is kind with our questions and he loves to bless and he loves to enrich and assure us as we obey him and as we give for him our lives when we can let the asking lead to accepting and acting at last he longs to get assuring and you know the virgin birth is just the beginning isn't it of Luke's gospel there's more to come healings and resurrections and miracles all over the place and there will be questions there'll be even more questions if you read Luke but the virgin birth stands at the gates of Christmas like a kind of sentinel the virgin birth stands actually at the threshold of Christianity at the threshold of God himself and it makes us question our questions and if the questions are just for finding more and more shadows and closing off answers from God then the virgin birth bars the way for us doesn't it towards God but if we can see the virgin birth and we can be like Mary we can just say I don't understand it all and I might not get it all but I want to accept it and I want to act upon it then your king waits to assure you in it for by the power of the Holy Spirit nothing is impossible with God let's pray