

We Wish You a Merry Rescue

The Advent of Christ and the Rescue of Sinners (Part 3)

Introduction

The Text

²⁶ 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)

The Mystery of the Incarnation

- A. Christianity is a religion full of mystery. And we shouldn't want it any other way. I believe it is, in fact, one indication that we are on the right track. For if we are truly following the God who created us, it would actually be the most unreasonable thing of all to think that He should always and only be reasonable to us.
 - 1. If we are finite and, beyond that, fallen beings, it should come as no surprise that the Infinite and Holy One sometimes mystifies us. Getting God into my mind is like trying to get the ocean's water into a thimble, or the sky's air into beach ball. God blows our minds.

- B. This is certainly not to say that there is nothing reasonable about our faith. Belief in the God of the Bible is at once both the most reasonable and unreasonable thing we can do.
 - 1. As I've mentioned before, perhaps the best illustration of this paradox is found in our consideration of the universe that God has placed us in. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psa 19:1). He can be known through what He has made (Rom 1:19-21).

- a. When I look up at the night sky, I can see that the universe goes on forever even though I can't get the infinitude of it into my little brain.
 - i. There is before me, then, at one and the same time, evidence to my mind that God is both accessible to me and infinitely beyond me, both imminent and transcendent, both knowable and unknowable, both reasonable and unreasonable—or both reasonable and mysterious. It makes sense and it's crazy, at the same time!

- C. The mystery always arises at the interface of the Creator and the creation. As thimbles trying to contain the ocean, as beach balls trying to contain the sky, we puzzle over these things: "How does the Eternal One relate to the temporal? How does the Sovereign One relate to the historical? How does the Supernatural One relate to the natural?" And so on.
 - 1. Deism, trying to remove this mystery, claims God created the world but then pulled away from it. They solve the mystery by removing the interface. The Creator doesn't interface with the creation at all. He created it and now He's gone.
 - 2. True Christian theism, true Christianity, on the other hand, sees God as on a trajectory not moving away from what He's created but moving towards it. He's always moving towards, leaning in, even coming down to interface with what He's made.

- D. And this bond only gets tighter as the Scriptures go on.
 - 1. He forms Adam from the dust and breathes into Him. It's God's breath in my lungs!
 - 2. And when He's created man, He covenants with him. It is not enough for Him just to be physically involved, He wants to be emotionally, relationally, covenantally involved.
 - 3. And even after men rebelled, and this bond is threatened, God still pursues. We think of Noah and Abraham. We think of Moses and the burning bush. And, of course, later the tabernacle and temple, a picture of His dwelling in the midst of His people.
 - 4. But all of this interfacing between the Creator and His creation reaches a new level in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God becomes man. 1 Person, 2 natures. Here is the greatest mystery of all and it is the fundamental tenet of our Christian faith. It is the reason we celebrate Christmas.

A Marvel of Nature and Wonder of Grace

- A. Before we move from this opening discussion, allow me to advance us just one step further into the mystery. Let me read you J.I. Packer's thoughts on the matter from his classic work, *Knowing God*: "How are we to think of the Incarnation? The New Testament does not encourage us to puzzle our heads over the physical and psychological problems that it raises, but to worship God for the love that was shown in it. For it was a great act of condescension and self-humbling. 'He, who had always been God by nature' writes Paul, 'did not cling to his privileges as God's equal, but stripped Himself of every advantage by

consenting to be a slave by nature and [be] born a man. And...as a human being, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, to the point of death, [even death on a cross]' (Phi 2:6-8 Phillips). And all this was for our salvation...

The crucial significance of the cradle at Bethlehem lies in its place in the sequence of steps down that led the Son of God to the cross of Calvary, and we do not understand it till we see it in this context. The key text for interpreting the Incarnation is not, therefore, the bare statement in John 1:14, 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,' but rather the more comprehensive statement of 2 Corinthians 8:9, 'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.' Here is stated not the fact of the Incarnation only, but also its meaning; the taking of manhood by the Son is set before us in a way which shows us how we should ever view it—not simply as a marvel of nature, but rather as a wonder of grace" (p. 58-59).

1. Did you hear that?! The greatest mystery of all is not that God did become man but that God would become man—that He actually desired to come down, take onto Himself our humanity, and save we who had so violently rebelled against Him. This moves the Incarnation of Christ from "marvel of nature" to "wonder of grace."
 - a. The greatest mystery of all, again, is not merely that God did become man, but that God would become man to save a sinner like me!

Christmas and the Condescension of God

- A. This is now the 3rd sermon on this text in Luke. Coming up to Christmas, I've given all 3 of these messages the same title: We Wish You a Merry Rescue—The Advent of Christ and the Rescue of Sinners. But beneath this we could put a subtitle for each individual message. The 1st: Christmas and the Trinitarian Dance; the 2nd: Christmas and its Covenantal Contours; and now this week: Christmas and the Condescension of God.
 1. That's the word I want you to come away with today: condescension. And when I say condescension, I'm not talking about what your mother used to say to you when you were a kid: "Don't you talk to me in that condescending tone young man." We're not talking about talking down or looking down your nose here. We're talking about coming down, God coming down to save.
 - a. This word even found its way into Packer's quote above: "[The Incarnation] was a great act of condescension and self-humbling." But more importantly, it seems to be one of the major points of our text.
- B. So we will note 3 particular movements of condescension that present themselves in our text: (1) From John to Jesus; (2) From the Temple to the Creature; (3) From Master to Servant. As we go along, it's God's dealings with Mary that will particularly come into focus for us.

(1) From John to Jesus

From Lesser to Greater and Greater to Lesser

A. The way Luke begins our narrative makes it plain that he wants us to compare and contrast the story of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus with what preceded in the story of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John. For he ties the 2 stories together in v. 26. “In the sixth month...” Of what? Of the year?

1. No. We know from v. 36 that this is referring to the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Therefore, we could begin our text like this: “In the sixth month [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy] the [same] angel Gabriel was sent from God to...Mary.” The 2 narratives go together. Each is told and meant to be read in light of the other.

a. And when we do this, while there are many parallels, it is the perpendiculars that stand out most strikingly. Jesus, with regard to His person and work, is shown to be not only related to John but superior to him at every point. John would be the forerunner, Jesus the fulfillment. John would be “the prophet of the Most High,” Jesus “the Son of the Most High.”

B. And yet, while the move from John to Jesus is, in one sense, from lesser to greater, we cannot miss that it is also, in another sense, a move from greater to lesser. The Son of the Most High is condescending to the most low.

1. The contextual elements of the 2 stories bear this observation out. One commentator sums it up this way: “The previous announcement about John came to a priest in the midst of a public worship service at the high holy place of Israel’s capital. The announcement about Jesus comes privately to a humble woman in a rural village” (BECNT, 107).

a. Zechariah was a priest, righteous and blameless according to the law. He was chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place of the temple in Jerusalem and offer incense to God. This would be the highest day of his career. And a whole multitude of people are outside the temple court praying.

i. It is in this context that the announcement of John is made.

b. Wouldn’t you expect that the announcement about God’s Son would be a step up from the announcement about John? Like medals being given out at the Olympics, from silver to gold?

i. But instead we’re going down. Before God Jesus is higher than John, but in this world He would be lower. We move down from the priesthood and the temple in Jerusalem with the multitude...and we come to Mary, a poor peasant girl; in Nazareth, an insignificant, perhaps even despised, rural village; with no multitude waiting or praying or excited, just her.

(1) We’re getting ready for the cross here even at the very beginning!

- C. And I was struck by the fact that, while Zechariah would have been doing all this work to prepare for his approach towards God in the Holy Place (robes, washings, incense, utensils, etc.), Mary is just living her life it would seem, going about her day, doing her household chores, eating her breakfast, and God approaches her and speaks to her where she's at.
 - 1. Do you want to know what we call this? Grace. We could not get ourselves back up to God so God comes down to us. Grace is God leaning in towards sinners, not with fire in His eyes, but love. Grace is God getting low, condescending towards His creatures for the sake of an even tighter bond with them.

From Troubling Grace to Amazing Grace

- A. It is, therefore, no surprise that Mary is first greeted with grace. We read in v. 28 that the angel "...came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" Where "favored one" could be better translated: "graced one." For the word is the verbal form of the Greek noun charis, or grace, which actually shows up in v. 30: "you have found favor (grace) with God."
- B. There's all this grace coming at Mary here from God. But how does she respond?
 - 1. In v. 29 we see that, at first, her response seems typical for a human encountering the angelic: "She was greatly troubled..." (paralleling Zechariah [v. 12]).
 - 2. But it seems there is more going on here. For as we keep reading we are turned in a different direction: "she was greatly troubled...at the saying, and tried to discern (ponder/consider) what sort of greeting this might be."
 - a. Her attention is not so much on the angel at this point as it is on what the angel said: "Greetings O graced one, the Lord is with you!" It would seem she is troubled not merely by the angel, this holy and majestic being, but by the grace the angel says is hers!
- C. Here's that "marvel of grace" that Packer was talking about. And what we find with Mary is that this marvel of grace is so good it's troubling. Her soul is stirred. "How could this be for me?!"
 - 1. This is the kind of stuff that troubles the soul at first but when it is finally embraced by faith, the trouble gives way to joy!
 - a. We see Mary erupting in song a few verses down: "⁴⁶ '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 he who is mighty has done great things for me...' (Luk 1:46-48a, 49a). Troubling Grace gives way to Amazing Grace!
- D. I imagine this is how all the people that God's chosen to grace have felt about it along the way.

1. Abraham: "I'm from a pagan heritage, my wife is barren, what are you doing choosing me as the father of your covenant people?" That's troubling grace, and it's amazing!
2. Or Moses: "I am not eloquent...I am slow of speech and tongue. Now I'm going to go tell Pharaoh what's up?!" That's troubling grace, and it's amazing!
3. Or Peter: "I'm not gonna be a rock. I'm gonna be the one that denies you worst of all. You're going to use me to feed Your sheep?" That's troubling grace, and it's amazing!
4. Or Paul: "I'm the chief of sinners, persecutor of the church, what am I doing an apostle, leading people I once tried to kill?" That's troubling grace, and it's amazing!

Mary as Anticipation

- A. So what about us? Mary's but an anticipation of the grace that's now come for us. She's not the only one to have Christ formed in her (Gal 4:19). She is not the only "graced one."
 1. Indeed that same Greek word appears only one other time in the NT: " ^{4b}In love ⁵he [God] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed (graced) us in the Beloved" (Eph 1:4b-6).
 - a. The grace of God that comes to Mary because of Christ, comes also to us in Him!
- B. Have you ever tried to discern, ponder, consider these things?! Have you ever been troubled by how good His grace is?! That God would come to you, meet you right where you're at, in your weakness and your sin, and pour out love upon you?
 1. Some of us aren't troubled enough right? We take His grace for granted. We think somehow we deserve it. We think salvation is like God choosing his own kickball team. Like it's the kids with the athletic savvy and tree-trunk thighs that are getting picked for the big game. But we don't get it! If you're not troubled by it, you don't really see it!
 2. Others of us are too troubled by this grace. We're so aware of our own failures and sins. We feel insignificant, like we blow it, like we couldn't be used.
 - a. We miss the whole trajectory of the gospel! These are the people that God comes to! O don't despair that you are too low, too base, too small. That is precisely where He goes! He steps down from the silver through the bronze to the guys who never even made it past first cuts.
 - b. It's okay to be troubled by this grace with Mary—"I'm nobody. He's going to take this nobody and through me bring into the world the one and only Somebody? How could it be? What grace is this?!"—only let troubling grace lead you to amazing grace!

(2) From the Temple to the Creature

An Overwhelming Overshadow

- A. There is a hint in our text at something overwhelmingly profound. Another move of condescension from our God, that perhaps no one was ready for. For Gabriel responds to Mary's inquiry in v. 34 with an explanation of how she would conceive the Christ even as a virgin: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (v. 35).
 - 1. It's that word "overshadow" that overwhelmed me. For it instantly connects us to the glory-cloud of God's presence from the OT.
 - a. The book of Exodus, from start to finish, is about God redeeming His people and setting His glory-presence back in their midst.
 - i. It begins with fire in the bush as He calls out to Moses.
 - ii. Then He leads them out as a pillar of cloud by day of fire by night.
 - iii. But the climax of the book is finally reached at the end, where this pillar of cloud and fire (God's glory-presence) takes up residence in a more permanent structure: the tabernacle (that would later become even more permanent in the Temple of Jerusalem). And the book of Exodus ends with Moses finishing the construction of the tabernacle, and we read: "³⁴Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.³⁵ And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on (overshadowed) it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex 40:34–35).
- B. The glory-cloud presence of God overshadowed and filled the tabernacle to such a degree that Moses wasn't even able to enter it. That's how God worked in the OT. He simultaneously drew Israel near and kept them at a distance to teach them about both His grace and His holiness.
 - 1. But as noted earlier, the trajectory of the Creator with His creation has always been towards an even tighter bond, and this would require of Him an even deeper condescension.
 - a. In our text, the glory-cloud presence of God is moving down from the temple, with its grand architecture, gold, cherubim, and everything else, and is now overshadowing a little peasant girl in a little nothing town.
 - i. What Moses couldn't enter, is now entering Mary! God is getting as close as He can to humanity.

Mary as Anticipation

- A. And Mary again is but an anticipation of what God would do with all His people. Bethlehem is aiming at Pentecost, when Christ would pour out His Spirit upon them and tongues of fire rest on them—representing the glory-presence of God overshadowing His people, entering His people. We become the Holy of Holies, the living temple of God.
1. But a holy God could only make such intimate connection with His sinful creatures if He Himself would make a full end of sin. Bethlehem was leading to, Pentecost was grounded upon, Calvary, Christ's death on the cross, where God washes away my sin, so that He can take up residence in me!

“^{5b} Christ Jesus ⁶ ...though he was in the form of God, [He] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:5b–8).

(3) From Master to Servant

From God's Condescension to Our Own

- A. There is one final move of condescension that I will leave us with here as we close. And it's not God's move, but ours. You see, God's condescension calls for a condescension of our own. He has lowered Himself to help, but we must now lower ourselves to receive it.
1. Mary leads the way for us in this: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (v. 38).
 - a. “God, I receive You! I'm troubled by this grace, amazed by this grace, desperate for this grace! I'm low! Let it be to me according to your word.”
- B. And as we open our hearts to Him we experience a wonderful union with our Creator—a bond that moves from Bethlehem, through Calvary, to Pentecost, but even beyond. For the trajectory of God's ever-tightening bond with His creatures finds its omega point, not at Pentecost, but in the new heavens and new earth—where finally heaven merges with earth, the Creator with the creation, forever.
1. Even on that day it is condescension on God's part. For the Saints do not rise to the New Jerusalem, but as John says: “I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2a).
 - a. We owe our salvation, our eternity, to our condescending God. Let's condescend ourselves this day, this Christmas, and receive Him!