

The Virgin Birth

by Dr. Manford George Gutzke

Luke begins his gospel with the story of the birth of John the Baptist and follows this with the story of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The birth of John the Baptist was unusual, and the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was extraordinary. Certainly the parents of John the Baptist were fully conscious of something unusual about John; and Mary, the mother of our Lord had been told that hers would be a most unusual child.

Luke is the only one of the writers of the four gospels who tells this story about John the Baptist. Matthew also tells the story of the birth of Jesus, but his is a much simpler story.

The Birth of John

The birth of John the Baptist had nothing miraculous about it, although it was unusual.

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years. And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, according to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense (Luke 1:5-10).

This account does not tell the actual age of Zacharias and Elisabeth, though it does note they were old, in the sense that their age would preclude any further possibility of a child being born to them. Zacharias was engaged in his duties in the temple, on behalf of the people who came to worship. Their sacrifices had been offered and accepted, and they were praying "without" at the time of incense. This meant they were standing outside of the Holy Place. They would wait thus until the priest came out and pronounced the benediction from God. Zacharias would go in to present their worship for them, to offer up their praise to God, and would then return and announce to them God's good will and gracious forgiveness.

But the events of this particular service of worship on this day did not follow the usual pattern:

And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:11-17).

It is not surprising that Zacharias would be startled and confused at this unusual experience.

Angels are never fully described in the Bible. There may be some description of their garments, as in the first chapter of Acts, and again, when the angels were in the open tomb of our Lord, their "shining garments" are mentioned, but this is no indication whether an angel looks like a man, or what he looks like. No angel is ever described as having wings. Many beautiful cards at the Christmas season and in other printed materials portray angels with beautiful, wide-spreading wings, but the idea is not Biblical.

The Bible speaks of Gabriel, and of Michael the archangel, but no further information is given. The Greek word used for *angel* is the word translated *messenger*.

It would seem quite natural to think of the angel as looking like a man, because he was standing. However, when Zacharias saw the messenger, there must have been some outward appearance which marked him as unusual, for "he was troubled and fear fell upon him. . . ." This is not fear in the sense of being terrified, but rather in the sense of awe, of being tremendously impressed by this visitor.

The angel spoke at once, saying "Fear not." No mention is made of the petition Zacharias may have been making in his praying, but it seems reasonable that he and Elisabeth could have been praying for years for a son. Graciously now came the message from God, ". . . thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son . . . thou shalt have joy and gladness . . . many shall rejoice at his birth. . ." The angel revealed further that this promised son was to grow into a man of unusually deep spiritual nature.

The reaction of Zacharias was one of doubt.

And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God: and am sent speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings (Luke 1:18,19).

Such a response is perhaps, quite natural, for Zacharias would be looking only at the circumstances. He was an old man, his wife an aged woman. "How can I believe this?" was his cry. The answer of Gabriel is significant: "I came from God! I stand in His presence!" This was offered as a sufficient guarantee of the validity of the prediction. As a godly man, a priest for most of his life, living close to God, Zacharias should have known better than to ask God for a reasonable explanation of His declared will and purpose. For this wavering, the chastisement of God came upon Zacharias.

And, behold, thou shalt be dumb and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season (Luke 1:20).

Thus did God make Zacharias realize, in a very personal way, that He was a God of power. The people outside were expecting the ministering priest to come out with the Lord's blessing, but he tarried within until they began to murmur in amazement: "they marvelled that he tarried so long." When Zacharias finally emerged, he had to make signs with his hands, for all power of speech had failed. They knew then that he must have had a vision from the Lord. As a result of what had happened between God and himself Zacharias was dumb, and this loss of speech continued until the baby was born.

The Birth of Jesus

And now we come in our study of Luke to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary (verses 26, 27).

"And in the sixth month" refers, of course, to the pregnancy of Elisabeth. There has been much questioning and a good deal of excitement over various English translations of the word *virgin*. The word used in the original comes from the Hebrew, meaning a *young woman or a young maiden*. It will be claimed that this word does not necessarily mean a virgin in the physical sense of the word, or "retaining

her virginity." They say the Greek equivalent, *alma*, means, by its very form, a *young woman*, or a *young unmarried woman*.

Actually, when the Hebrews talked about a young unmarried woman, they meant just exactly what we mean when we use the word *virgin*. To them a young, unmarried woman was a virgin. They had no special word for what we call, technically, a *virgin*. No doubt Mary was a young woman, probably in her teens. If she were older than that, she would likely have been married, since it was the custom of Jewish parents to unite their young people in marriage after they came to adolescence. Thus this young girl was engaged or espoused to Joseph, but they had never lived together as man and wife, according to the customs of the land. The story in Matthew and in Luke makes it plain that Mary was a virgin in the sense in which that word is used today.

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that are highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women (verse 28).

The Jewish people were expecting a Messiah. They were looking for a certain person to be born among them whom God would use to deliver them. He was called, in the Old Testament, *The Messiah*, and in the New Testament, *Christ*. Every Israelitish woman cherished in her heart the hope as a young girl, that she might become the mother of the Messiah. He would be the first-born son, and this old tradition lived in the hearts of the young women, who longed that their first-born son might be the God-promised deliverer.

Throughout Jewish history this expectation of the Messiah is found. Moses had said there would arise among them a prophet greater than himself. So, when the angel came to Mary and said, "Thou art highly favoured . . . blessed art thou among women," she could well have been aware of the possibility that this would now be a fulfillment of the expectation among the women of her nation. This would be why the angel was telling her that she was especially chosen by God!

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end (Luke 1:29-33).

At any rate the promise to David was now to be brought to fulfillment right here. Mary was of the house of David, and because she was in that family, it was possible for her to become the mother of the Messiah.

The startling nature of this pronouncement aroused a great question in Mary's mind.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? (Luke 1:34).

At first glance Mary's question seems to be like the doubt of Zacharias. Yet there must be some difference between these two cases since Zacharias was disciplined for his doubt, and Mary was not. Apparently there was a real difference in the situations of these two people before God. In the first place, Zacharias was an old man, married for years, with a long experience of service to God and blessing from God, and the promise made to him was not really as startling as was this one to a young, modest,

unmarried girl. In other words, it seems that it would have been easier for Zacharias to believe than for Mary. If anyone has difficulty in believing the record of the virgin birth of Jesus of Nazareth, there may be some slight comfort in the fact that Mary questioned in those first few moments. Mary said, in effect, "this is impossible. I am not married. I know not a man."

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren (Luke 1:35,36).

And then the angel added something which has been quoted far and wide always to the blessing of all God's children.

For with God nothing shall be impossible (Luke 1:37).

The Miracle Involved

Often the authenticity of this portion of Scripture is questioned on the ground it involves something impossible. It should always be adequate by way of answer to focus attention at this point: the questions asked by such students are similar to Mary's question. This is what she wanted to know. In her case she asked Gabriel: "How can those things be?" It is helpful to note how Gabriel told her that God was going to take care of this matter, and with Him *nothing* was impossible.

Yet we can profit by further considerations of this important matter of the virgin birth. Let us begin by asking, what is the actual proportion of miracle involved in this incident?

Mary's pregnancy apparently was normal in every respect save one: instead of the life of the father joining the life of the mother to bring life to the Child, it was the creative act of God that gave life to the body of the mother. The Scripture reveals that God created man and woman in the first place, giving them life by His power. The story of the virgin birth is credible to anyone who believes God gave life to Adam and Eve.

The Bible speaks of Adam as the first man, and of the Second Man as the Lord from heaven. The work of creation that produced Adam, whose life is in our bodies as human beings today, is the same kind of creation involved in the generating of the body of Jesus of Nazareth. The babe of Bethlehem was different from us however in that His life was the life of God, and so was sinless; whereas in us is the life of Adam which is sinful.

All consideration of this amazing account should recognize that one cannot *convince* an unsaved, an unregenerate human being of the virgin birth. If a man does not believe in God, he has no basis upon which to substantiate any belief about the virgin birth. There is nothing on which to ground such faith, if there is no God. Mary believed in God as the God of her nation. In her faith in Him she was able to believe He was all-powerful, and could do anything He willed. The story is just that simple in the last analysis: Mary believed and yielded herself to God for His divine purposes with confidence that He could do as He would. Unfortunately and tragically in the world today there are many people who call themselves Christians and who would be hurt if they were questioned as to their sincerity, who hold that this doctrine of the virgin birth is either untrue or unimportant.

The Bible tells about the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ in two passages: the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke. In each case the Word affirms plainly the fact that Jesus was born of a virgin. There

is no question about it, no loophole which permits even the slightest doubt.

The virgin birth was admittedly the faith of the Early Church. The Apostles' Creed affirms it in plain language:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary . . .

In that short statement, there are two clauses about His virgin birth. And this statement makes it clear that the Early Church held, as taught by the apostles, that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary.

The doctrine of the virgin birth makes Jesus Christ the *only-begotten* Son of God. The Scriptures speak of believers being begotten of the Word, and begotten of the Spirit, but the phrase the *only-begotten Son of God* is used exclusively of this One whose body was begotten by the power of God in the Virgin Mary.

When the Bible refers to Jesus Christ, it teaches that He was God, incarnate in human form. Before the creation of the world there was God, the Father; God, the Son; and God, the Holy Ghost, three Persons in the one Godhead eternally.

In John 17 Jesus prayed:

And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was (verse 5).

There seems to be no question but that the Son of God, who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, lived with God before He came into the world. This is the meaning of the *pre-existence of Christ*.

When a man is born into this world, that is the beginning of that person. No one would think that person had lived before. But when Jesus was born, that was *not* the beginning of the Son of God. That was the beginning of His earthly body, which God created for a specific purpose. "A body hast thou prepared for me" (Hebrews 10:5). But He Himself was the Son of God, the *eternal* Son of God, and had always existed with the Father. If Jesus of Nazareth is considered as having been born just as a human being, there would be an impossible situation in the doctrine of His person. He could not be born of human parents as men are, and yet be the Son of God eternally forever. If the phrase *Son of God* refers merely to an office, then no virgin birth was necessary; but if the phrase refers to a *person*, then He could not have been born as men are. As the Son of God He was one of the Trinity. This the Bible indicates plainly as He Himself affirmed:

I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father (John 16:28).

And so we see that the doctrine of the virgin birth is consistent with the pre-existence of the Son of God.

There is yet another line of argument. If the Lord Jesus was born of a virgin, as the Son of God, it would mean that He was not sinful, as was Adam, but sinless as His heavenly Father. David said, in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." And Paul points out that because Adam fell, all his progeny, all human beings, were fallen (Romans 5:12-18). Hebrews 4:15 states ". . . but [Jesus] was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." This is to say that while Jesus had a body like ours, with bone and muscle and blood, lungs that breathed air, a digestive

system that became hungry, a body which grew weary and required sleep, in all points He was like man, but without sin. It seems clear that for Jesus to be without sin, the virgin birth was necessary. Only in this way was it possible for Jesus to be human, and yet sinless.

John in his gospel (John 1:13) seems to describe such a birth when he speaks of those who were ". . . born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." In Galatians 4:4, we see that ". . . when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman . . ." Jesus Christ was not born of human, physical progeneration, but by the will of God. The Scriptures are clear beyond doubt on this point.

The virgin birth of Jesus of Nazareth implies the deity of Jesus Christ. If men are to put their trust in Jesus Christ as God the virgin birth is important because it implies that He is God.

Also the virgin birth demonstrates the sovereign, creative work of God. When God in heaven wanted to produce a body for His Son, He seems to have willed it to be by His Word. This is how the world was created, and this is the way a man is saved. When Almighty God speaks His Word to the heart . . . that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life," faith is generated that leads the soul to God.

This is called the new birth, regeneration. A person doesn't feel it since there are no physical aspects, but there are results. From that moment on the person is different: he thinks differently, and wants to do differently. Something new really does take place, and this is the will of God for men and women. Becoming a Christian is hearing the Word of God and allowing the Holy Spirit to quicken the heart, permitting the power of God to take control in the whole life. Then when God works in a man "both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13), the man finds himself able to believe. "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine. . ." (John 7:17). He will have in his heart a readiness to believe. So when he has heard the Word of God, then ". . . faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). The Word of God is thus spoken to the soul, and God Himself brings that person to life eternal.

Something like that seemed to happen in the birth of the Lord Jesus in His human body. This did not happen to Mary without her knowledge. The angel came and told Mary, apparently working to enable her to believe. When he told Mary that she was to have a Son before she was married, she had the natural question of a carefully reared young girl, to whom this seemed impossible. When the reply of the angel was, "With God nothing is impossible," he put the name of God, the idea of God's power into her heart.

Thus it followed that when she finally grasped this marvelous thing which was to come to her, she could humbly say: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word . . ." (Luke 1:38). Simply, with real faith, Mary accepted what God had commanded and promised. This is the attitude which will occur in the heart of any willing hearer. Even if you should feel that actually you know very little, if you have heard the Word of God speaking to you, and are willing to commit yourself to God, saying "*Behold thy servant*, let it be unto me according to thy word," this miracle of being able to believe will happen.

The heart must be willing, but when it is, God can and will save any soul who is ready to yield himself into God's hands. All that is necessary is willingness on the part of the man or woman, and God will work to save him.