

Luke 1:34-38

Sermon: **We want to earn it**

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1 (Luke 1:34-38)

Mary said to the angel, „How can this be, since I am a virgin?“ The angel answered and said to her, „The Holy Spirit will come upon you; and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the Holy child shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, “Behold the bondservant of the Lord; my it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

GOD’S SIGNS

2 (Luke 1:34)

Mary said to the angel, „How can this be, since I am a virgin?“

In other words, Mary had not yet had any sexual relations with a man. Mary asks the angel: “How will this be?” But Zechariah asked the angel: “By what will I know this?”

Many teachers have made a mountain out of a molehill from these two questions. They claimed that Mary did not doubt and did not answer in unbelief, while Zechariah did. And many of those teachers say that is why Zechariah was punished, and Mary was not.

I personally have a Study Bible in English that gives footnotes below the verses. For verse 34 it says: “Mary responded in faith, unlike Zechariah who responded in unbelief.”

2.1 But if we look carefully at both questions, I believe there is no real difference at the core. Both reacted in a completely normal, human way.

Zechariah said: “Are you sure about what you’re saying? I am an old man.” And Mary said: “I have no man! How is it possible that I will give birth to a child?”

Now, what is the difference between the signs given to Zechariah and Mary? I would say – none! Zechariah became mute, and every day when he woke up, through that sign (annoying, I admit), he realized that this would truly happen. And that sign was also a reminder to his neighbors, relatives, and friends that this child would be something special.



2.2 Mary didn’t need such a sign. Why? Because she became pregnant. And every time she woke up, her pregnancy reminded her that what Gabriel had said would truly happen!

But imagine this: Mary was not allowed to have sexual relations with a man before marriage, and now she was pregnant. How could she explain this to her future husband Joseph—that she had not betrayed him with another man? In a way, we can even say that Mary was also “punished,” but in reality she wasn’t—it was simply that she too had her own sign, a daily reminder that what Gabriel said would be fulfilled.

One thing is certain: God knows how to put us in very strange situations just to test our faith.

2.3 I want to pause here. Why do we mostly assume—interpret—that Gabriel’s response to Zechariah was some kind of punishment? I think that says more about us and about how we actually view God. I would like what I’m about to say now to be understood as something very important.

WE WANT TO DESERVE IT

3 The hardest thing for any person—even for a believer—is to accept without a trace of doubt that God is merciful.

In the minds of many Bible interpreters, there is a voice shouting: “Mary was better than Zechariah.” They say: “Mary had greater faith than Zechariah.”

In other words, deep in their hearts they believe Mary was better than him. They want to believe that. And why do they want to? Because if Mary can be better, then we too can be better than others. And if we are better, then we “deserve” God’s favor.

There is something inside human beings that drives them to shape God in their own image, to interpret Him according to their liking. And that something is this: “I want to deserve God’s favor. I am good. I am better than my neighbor.”

3.1 When I talk with people, I see how hard it is for them to come to terms with the fact that we can do absolutely nothing to earn a reward.

It is incredible how offensive that is to us, how much we resist it. We are insulted by the idea that God would just give us forgiveness, that He would grant us mercy. “What does He have to forgive me for? I am good! Okay, I’m not perfect, but at least I’m better than my neighbor¹!”

On one hand, when we think about it, God offers forgiveness—and He offers it freely. All we need to do is repent and sincerely seek His forgiveness. It sounds too good to be true. But on the other hand, that is exactly our greatest stumbling block. Why? Because at the very core of our being, we don’t want it to be true!

3.2 It is so hard for us to accept it. Every atom of our being cries out: “Surely this cannot be true! Surely it cannot be as simple as the Bible says. I must, I want to earn it, I want to be rewarded!”

But the truth of the Bible is—God is like that. He doesn’t ask us how He should do it, He doesn’t seek our advice. He does it His way, and He truly abounds in grace and forgiveness. God wants to offer it to us freely, as a gift.

3.3 In 1 John, the author says that if we cannot accept this idea about God, then we are not His children.

This is no small matter—if we cannot accept that, even though we don’t deserve it, God has still given us grace, then we are not God’s children.

This is a claim that every one of us has to wrestle with and fight. In the end, we must come to terms with the fact that it is indeed true. It is not easy—this is the greatest struggle that I, and all of you who proclaim yourselves Christians, must face.

¹ Yes, we may be better citizens than our neighbors—and many people are. But that does not mean that we are true Christians who love God with all our heart and with all our soul. In other words, just because we are better citizens than others does not mean that we are children of God.

GOD CALLS US THROUGH TRIALS

4 I want to point out something else: our lives are full of trials, tests, falling and rising, suffering, pain, and loss. Sometimes we feel the burden we carry on our backs is just too heavy. Our natural reaction is usually: “Surely, I am being punished by God! What have I done to deserve such hardship in life?”

But from my perspective—and the way I see the God of the Bible, as Jesus presented Him in the New Testament—that is not the truth.

The truth is, yes, God has punished and He will punish when He chooses. We see this clearly in the Old Testament—God punishes individuals, nations, or peoples.

But when God brings judgment on someone, He makes it clear through His prophets: “This will happen to you because of your unbelief, disobedience, idolatry, adultery...”² And before He acts, He always warns and rebukes that person or nation multiple times.

4.1 But if God does not inform me, I believe it is not punishment—it is a “call.”

We must understand that God’s priorities are completely different from ours. God does not primarily want for us a “here and now” life that is fulfilled, joyful, prosperous, through which we will become wise, sanctified, and finally inherit eternal life. That is not God’s motive—that is our motive and goal.

God’s motive is to shape us into people who are ready for His kingdom. And He is willing to sacrifice our happiness to achieve that. That does not trouble Him. One of the ways He does this is by bringing trials into our lives: pain, disappointment, poverty, loss...

And through those trials He breaks down the beliefs we once thought were the very purpose of our existence. Some of us, through that process, decide to stop clinging with our claws to everything this world has to offer.

And only then do the real questions begin: “Why do I exist? Why am I here? What should I be investing my life in?”

4.2 As long as life is good, we humans are comfortable, lazy, sleepy, and we do not ask ourselves the questions that are truly matters of life and death. And in order for us to ask them, God must call us.

I don’t know why it is that way, I don’t know why God created us like that—but the truth is, He did.

And so, some of us can look back with joy and remember that the hardship we endured brought us incredible wisdom. Wisdom that revealed why we are here and what the purpose of our existence is.

And we wouldn’t trade that for anything, because that realization is more precious than life itself.

² Isaiah 1:2–4; Jeremiah 7:25–26; Amos 4:6–11

On the other hand, I believe there are some of us Christians who have not yet gone through that. But if I understand the New Testament correctly, each of us will pass through certain trials. Why?

Because God does not want in His kingdom shallow, unwise, careless, and sleepy people.

4.3 There is nothing more important in a person's life than to be rightly oriented toward God. Who God is and what His motives are—that is the foundation of our spiritual and mental stability.

If we don't have that, we have nothing—I believe.

We've thrown this life into the wind, as people say. But if we do have that, then we have everything. No matter how much wealth, reputation, connections, prosperity, titles, or even love from our loved ones we may have here and now—if we don't have a heart rightly oriented toward God, we have nothing.

God understands this fully, and He is willing to take away whatever He must in order to wake us from our sleep and bring us home.

4.4 Likewise, God is not some ego-maniac who gets offended when we hurt Him and then punishes us. No—God calls us because He loves us. He knows that we are rushing—not walking, but rushing—into our own destruction.

And so, because He loves us, He shakes us, He awakens us, and sometimes, unfortunately, He has to take drastic measures to achieve His purpose. Every child of God must come to this realization and reconcile with this truth during their lifetime—I truly believe that.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN OUR REALITY

5 (Luke 1:35)

The angel answered and said to her, „The Holy Spirit will come upon you ; and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the Holy child shall be called the Son of God.

It is very easy to think this means some kind of sexual relationship. But even to think such a thing is disgusting and repulsive—I believe to all of us. That is not a biblical perspective; that is more of a pagan way of thinking³.

5.1 Let's look again at what Mary asked the angel. Mary was basically saying: “How can this be, since I have never had sexual relations with a man?”

The angel replies: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you.” This can be understood in two ways:

1. The Holy Spirit will literally come and have relations with Mary.

³ The idea that gods from the heavens had relations with humans and created demigods comes from ancient mythologies—from Mesopotamia (Gilgamesh), Egypt (pharaohs as descendants of the gods), to Greece (Zeus and heroes such as Heracles).

But that makes no sense. Who are we talking about here? The Holy Spirit—He is Spirit, He has no body, He is not a creature, but a metaphysical Being.

2. The Holy Spirit is the invisible power of God at work in this reality. The angel uses language Mary can understand. She is human, she knows a relationship is required to conceive a child. And so, the angel says: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you.” Not literally, but meaning: “The power of God will come upon you.” It is a metaphor.

The second approach is the biblical perspective. Yahweh works through his Spirit in our reality. He changes the weather, gives life to every living creature, and sustains the earth as it hangs upon nothing.

And in the same way, the angel tells Mary, God can cause your womb, by the laws He established in this reality, to become fruitful. He is Almighty God.

5.2 The angel continues: “Therefore the child to be born will be holy.” The proof that the child will be holy is Mary’s miraculous conception.

But I believe this event is no more extraordinary than all the other miracles that surrounded Jesus’ coming into the world.

5.3 In fact, if we go back to the beginning of the Bible, we find an even greater miracle. At the very beginning, Yahweh formed a complete human being from the dust of the ground—bones, muscles, organs, flesh, and life itself. Here, at least, Mary was involved, a woman carrying a child in her womb. There, there was nothing but dust.



That is why I do not see Mary's conception as the greatest miracle in the Bible. It is another reminder that nothing is impossible for Yahweh.

5.4 All of these events have one thing in common. They are signs from God, announcing that something of the greatest importance is taking place—first for the people of Israel, and then for the rest of humanity.

At the same time, they reveal something very important about God himself. He is able to work above the laws he established within this reality. He can adapt them, change them, and use them to accomplish the purpose he has at that moment. Why? Because he is the Creator and Lord of this reality.

5.5 The angel then says to Mary: “And therefore the child will be holy.” In other words, the evidence that the child will be holy is Mary’s supernatural conception.

5.6 But what does Luke actually want to say when he connects the work of the Holy Spirit with the “holiness” of this child? I want to pause here for a moment, because throughout church history, a serious theological debate developed precisely around this question.

5.7 For centuries, Christian theologians have tried to understand how Jesus, who is truly human and who received his human nature from Mary, can be completely without sin. In the West, this question became especially important under the strong influence of the Augustinian understanding of original sin.

For those who may not be familiar with that expression, it refers to the teaching that Adam’s fall brought consequences upon the whole of humanity, and that sin—or the consequences of sin—is somehow passed on to every human being.

And if the consequences of Adam’s fall are passed on through human nature, then the question arises: How can Christ, who is truly human, be free from sin?

5.8 Later, various theologians attempted to answer that question. Thomas Aquinas, for example, tried to explain that Christ’s body truly came from Mary and therefore, in terms of human nature, from Adam, but that Christ was not conceived through human male seed. His conception took place through the action of the Holy Spirit.

According to this theological framework, Christ is truly human, but he was not conceived in the same way that human seed is passed from a man to his offspring.

5.9 Here we need to be very precise.

Thomas Aquinas did not simply teach what would much later become the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception in its present form. He did not believe that Mary had been completely preserved from original sin from the very first moment of her own conception. The later Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception developed further and was formally defined much later.

5.10 Therefore, the historical development cannot simply be summarized by saying: “Mary was sinless, and therefore Jesus was sinless.” The matter is much more complex. Catholic theology later taught that Mary was preserved from original sin precisely because of Christ’s merits. So, according to that theology, Christ is not sinless because Mary was first sinless. On the contrary, Mary was preserved from sin because of Christ.

5.11 Eastern Orthodox theology does not accept the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The Eastern tradition understands the inheritance of Adam’s sin differently and

often speaks of “ancestral sin,” emphasizing inherited mortality and corruption rather than Adam’s personal guilt in the same way as the Western Augustinian tradition.

5.12 Classical Protestantism also accepts the virgin conception and Christ’s complete sinlessness, but generally does not accept Roman Catholic Mariology or the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The Protestant theological framework most commonly connects Christ’s holiness with the action of the Holy Spirit at his conception, rather than with any prior sinlessness of Mary.

5.13 I am saying all of this because I want to be fair to history. I do not want to misrepresent the Church Fathers or suggest that they did not understand what they were doing. On the contrary. Many of them were very seriously trying to answer genuine theological questions of their own time.

But we must also remember that they lived within a particular historical and theological context.

5.14 And now we come to the question that interests me personally.

If we say that the action of the Holy Spirit at Christ’s conception was necessary in order for the child to be holy, that is, without sin, then we have to ask: What exactly does that mean? If the reason is that sin must not be transmitted through human conception, then the question arises: Why would human involvement in itself constitute an obstacle to God’s holiness?

And this is precisely where I want to make a comparison with Adam. At the beginning of creation, in the Book of Genesis, Adam was not born from another human being.

God directly formed him from the dust of the ground and gave him life. There was no human parent involved in his creation. There was no human seed. There was no human mother. God directly created the human being.

If God, through his direct action, could create Adam holy and without sin, then we have to ask: why, in Christ’s case, would human conception itself constitute a problem that had to be somehow bypassed in order for Christ to be without sin?

5.15 But let us now look at what happened with Adam. If the problem is that a human being participates in conception and, in doing so, somehow passes on sin, then Adam should be the best possible example of a human being who would never sin. He had neither a human father nor a human mother. God created him directly from the dust of the ground. There was no human intermediary who could “defile” his human nature. And yet Adam sinned.

5.16 So we have to ask: Is the real problem actually the presence of a human being in the process—in this case, Mary? Because if human participation in itself were an obstacle to holiness, then we would expect Adam, who was created without any human intermediary, to remain without sin. But we know that this did not happen.

5.17 This shows me something important: a human being, in and of himself, is not an obstacle to God’s work. God can accomplish his will however he chooses. If he was able to create a

sinless human being from the dust of the ground, then his ability to create or preserve holiness is not limited by whether another human being participates in the process. A human being cannot limit God's work simply by participating in it, if God has decided to accomplish something.

5.18 And this is precisely why the comparison with Adam is important to me. I am not comparing Adam with Christ in terms of greatness or importance. I am asking a question about the logic of this explanation itself. If the absence of human participation were necessary for a human being to be without sin, then Adam should be the perfect example of such a human being. But Adam fell. Christ, who received his human nature from Mary, did not fall. Therefore, it seems to me that we have to look deeper than the question of human conception when we try to understand Christ's sinlessness.

5.19 In other words, perhaps later theology tried to answer the question of Christ's sinlessness in a way that Luke himself is not trying to explain at all.

That is what I want to show here. I am not denying Christ's sinlessness. On the contrary, the New Testament is completely clear that Christ was without sin. Paul, the apostles, and the entire New Testament witness speak of his holiness and sinlessness.

But the question is: Is this what Luke wants to emphasize here when the angel says: "Therefore the holy child who will be born will be called the Son of God"?

5.20 My interpretation is that we should understand this text within the narrative Luke is building. Mary is Jewish. She knows the Scriptures. She knows God's promises to Israel. She knows the promise given to Abraham. She knows David's promise concerning a descendant who would sit on the throne. Together with her people, she is waiting for the long-promised Messiah. She knows the prophetic promises about God's kingdom and the King who will reign.

Therefore, when she hears that she will give birth to a child who will be holy and will be called the "Son of God," she does not necessarily have to think in terms of later theological categories, such as the question of how original sin is transmitted through human conception. She is listening as an Israelite.

The angel is telling her that something is happening within her womb that is connected to everything God had promised to Israel. The child she will give birth to will be holy. He will be the "Son of the Most High." He will be given the throne of David, his father. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will have no end.

5.21 Therefore, in this narrative, I want to understand the word "holy" primarily in relation to his special and unique role in God's plan. This child is specially set apart for God's purpose. He is the promised King. He is the Messiah. He is the Son of God. He is the one through whom God's promises will be fulfilled.

5.22 The action of the Holy Spirit at the conception is precisely a sign that something completely extraordinary is happening.

In other words, Mary does not have to conclude from the angel's words: "If I conceived with Joseph, the child would be sinful, but because he is conceived through the Holy Spirit, the child will be without sin." That is not what the text explicitly says.

5.23 It is possible that later theology developed an explanation in that direction, especially because of the problem of original sin.

But through his narrative, Luke primarily shows that the child who is being born through God's direct action is precisely the promised holy child, the Messiah and the King.

And this is why I want to clarify something important here. I do not want to interpret the text primarily through what later Church Fathers concluded that the text must mean. I want to try to understand it through the narrative itself.

If I can follow the event from beginning to end, if the individual statements explain one another, if they fit into the broader biblical narrative, and if the meaning develops naturally through what Luke says, then I have a solid basis for my interpretation.

But if I have to bring a later theological system into the text in order to explain why something was said, then I have to stop and ask myself: "Is Luke really saying this, or am I bringing something into the text that was developed later?"

5.24 That is the approach I want to maintain throughout this sermon.

I do not want to say that the Church Fathers were foolish, uneducated, or that they did not understand what they were doing. On the contrary. Many of them were very seriously trying to answer real theological questions of their own time. But they also lived within a particular historical and theological context.

Therefore, my question is not: "Did the Church Fathers say this?" My question is: "Can their interpretation be demonstrated from the biblical narrative itself?" If it can, I will accept it. If it cannot, then I can respect it as a historical theological opinion, but I do not have to accept it as the meaning Luke intended to convey.

5.25 That is precisely why I wanted to explore more closely the connection between the word "holy," the action of the Holy Spirit, and what Mary, as an Israelite, understood when she heard the angel's message.

What I want to show here is this: Luke does not use the holiness of the child primarily to explain the mechanism by which the transmission of sin through human conception is prevented, but to show that the child who is being born is special, divinely appointed, and set apart for a unique messianic role. He is the promised King. He is the Son of God.

5.26 Therefore, we do not necessarily have to understand the virgin conception as an explanation of Jesus' sinlessness, but rather as a sign and evidence of God's special action in history through which he began to fulfill what he had promised.

5.27 And there is one more thing that is important to me here. I think this sign was primarily intended for Mary, rather than for some wider audience.

Of course, today this event is part of our Gospel, and through the writing of the Gospels it has become known to all of us. But at that moment, the focus was on Mary. It was a personal and very intimate moment in her life. She had just heard from the angel what was going to happen, and later, through her own pregnancy, she could see that what he had told her was actually coming true.

We see something similar with Elizabeth. When she heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And that was a personal moment for her, something deeply connected to her own life and something that, I believe, she thought about for the rest of her life.

5.28 We cannot fully enter into their experience today. We cannot completely identify with either Mary or Elizabeth, because these were their personal experiences, deeply intertwined with their lives and with everything they were.

That is why what matters more to me here is what that sign meant to Mary at that moment, rather than immediately using it to open a later theological debate about whether Christ was without sin and how that could have been possible.

That sign was not merely an explanation of what was going to happen. It was also personal encouragement for Mary for the journey that lay ahead of her.

And, of course, in the end, through this miracle, God encouraged Mary to persevere in what he had called her to do.

ACCEPTING THE ROLE GIVEN BY GOD IS A SIGN OF WISDOM

6 (Luke 1:36)

And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month.

The angel tells Mary that her relative Elizabeth is also six months pregnant. Mary knows Elizabeth is advanced in years, and if what the angel says is true—that she is pregnant—then this can only be a miracle of God.

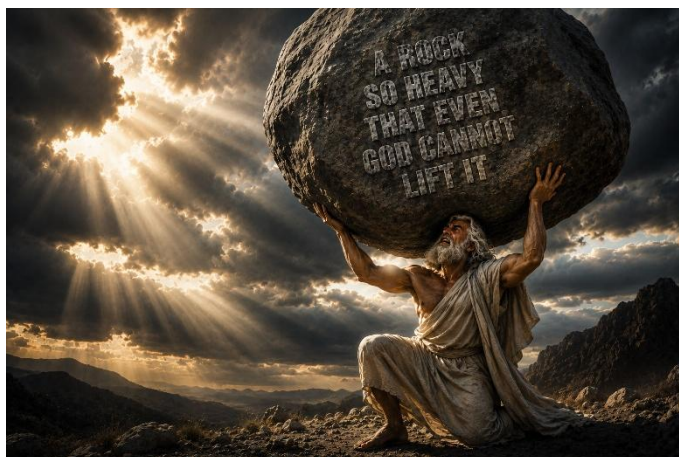
In Luke 1:39 we read that Mary hurried to see her relative. She wanted to see with her own eyes if the angel's words were true.

6.1 (Luke 1:37)

For nothing will be impossible with God.

Gabriel here emphasizes that if God says something will happen, there is no point in thinking it won't. Because if God wills it, it will be.

But the statement "Nothing is impossible with God" can easily be misunderstood. What do I mean?



There are, in fact, things that are impossible for God to do: God cannot lie, God is not evil, God is not contradictory to logic, God is not irrational.

He cannot create a stone so heavy that He Himself cannot lift it. Scripture clearly shows there are things God cannot do. Therefore, out of who God is—when He says He will do something, it will happen.

6.2 (Luke 1:38)

And Mary said, “Behold the bonds slave of the Lord; my it be done to me according to your word.” And the angle departed from her.

Though Mary, like all of us, is a sinful being, she is an incredibly wise woman and an example to all of us of the attitude we must come to have toward God.

If we don’t, I believe we are not God’s children. What Mary declares here is the complete opposite of our natural human attitude toward God. We think: “God, You created me—okay, then make it worth it for me.”

6.3 Mary’s attitude is: “God, this is not about me or my life, my existence. This is not about what I want. This is about You, God, and what You want from me. This is about the role You want me to play for You. I want to serve Your purposes, Your plan. That is all I want and all I can be. In the end, I can only be what You give me to be. And if You have chosen me to be the mother of the Messiah, then let it be so.”

6.4 Of course, we could twist this and interpret it as: “Wow, I get to be the mother of the Messiah, I must be special.”

But notice how Mary refers to herself: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.” She knows who God is and who she is. Her walk with God is an example we should—and must—follow.

6.5 Finally: will there be days in our lives of consecration when it will be hard to reconcile with the fact that God is good? Yes, surely.

But if we are God's children, in time we will return to Him and seek His forgiveness. Because we know that, after everything we have gone through in walking with Him, we don't want to be anywhere else but in His arms—just like His Son, Jesus Christ.