



Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 9, 2007
Released on Wednesday, December 5, 2007

“Called to Be a Vessel”

Lesson: Luke 1:26–38.

Read: Luke 1:26–38.

Devotional Reading: Psalm 40:1–5.

Times: 6 or 5 B.C.

Place: Nazareth in Galilee

LESSON TEXT Luke 1:26–38

26And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

27To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

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

29And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

30And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

31And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

32He 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:

33And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

34Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

35And 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.

36And, 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.

37For with God nothing shall be impossible.

38And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:
Retell the story of Gabriel's appearance to Mary.

Give examples of other instances in which God chose “lowly” people to carry out His tasks.

Write a prayer that asks God to use him or her in a way that seems impossible to human thinking.

LESSON OUTLINE

GABRIEL’S GREETING (Luke 1:26—30)

GOD’S MESSAGE (Luke 1:31—33)

MARY’S RESPONSE (Luke 1:34—38)

INTRODUCTION

Precious Cargo—Fragile Vessels

New York jeweler Harry Winston bought the famed Hope Diamond from an estate sale in 1949. In 1958, Winston decided to donate the diamond to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Weighing 45.52 carats, the gem was extremely valuable.

So how would the transfer be made? Rejecting armored trucks or elaborate delivery schemes, Winston merely put the diamond in a box and sent it through the U.S. mail! It arrived in good order, without incident.

Are we startled that someone would choose a fragile vessel and an ordinary means of conveyance for such an extraordinary cargo? As we ponder this account, we can recall the fact that God chose a young peasant named Mary to bring His precious Son into the world. When she was called to be a vessel, she agreed. Her willingness to be used by God is the highlight of this week’s lesson.

LESSON BACKGROUND

As we compare last week’s lesson with today’s, we see interesting parallels in God’s plan to bring salvation to humanity. The angel Gabriel appeared to both Zechariah and Mary, in separate incidents. Each was quite startled at Gabriel’s appearance. Gabriel instructed each not to be afraid. Each was promised a child. Each was given a hint of his or her child’s future greatness. Each was told what the name of his or her child was to be.

Thus the beauty of God’s plan for salvation continued to unfold. Zechariah had been called to believe; then Mary was called to be a vessel. Although we may not get an angelic visitation, God continues to issue calls to us through His Word.

QUESTIONS

I. GABRIEL’S GREETING (Luke 1:26—30)

1. How did Luke connect the announcement of Jesus’ birth with that of John’s birth (Luke 1:26)?

The events in this week’s lesson occurred “in the sixth month.” This refers not to the sixth month on the Jewish calendar but to the sixth month of Elisabeth’s pregnancy (see v. 24). In this way Luke connected the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist with the announcement of Jesus’ birth to Mary. The messenger in both cases was the Angel Gabriel.

Luke's Gospel is careful to locate events in both time and place. The account is definitely not a "once upon a time" fairy tale! In preparing to send His Son into the world, God makes sure that this angelic announcement is documented.

2. What was Mary's relationship to Joseph when Gabriel spoke to her (v. 27)?

Gabriel addressed Mary (Luke 1:27). The characteristic of Mary that is emphasized by Luke is that she was a virgin (being stated twice). She had never had intimate relations with a man (see v. 34). This would be essential to fulfilling her role in God's plan.

Mary was, however, espoused—or betrothed—to a man named Joseph. Betrothals among the Jews were like our engagements but more binding. The betrothed couple was not permitted the intimacies of married life, but the arrangement was as binding as marriage itself. It could not be broken except by divorce. Since a young woman is usually betrothed in her teens at this time, it is likely that Mary is quite young when the angel greets her.

3. Why was Mary troubled at Gabriel's greeting (vs. 28-30)?

Mary was understandably troubled at Gabriel's greeting. First, the very sight of an angel was unsettling. Second, his words perplexed her. Why did he address her as highly favored and as one blessed among women?

Gabriel recognizes the obvious signs of distress in Mary's countenance. So he assures her with the words "Fear not" (v. 30). He also calls her by name, a subtle proof that this is no case of mistaken identity. It is indeed *Mary* who has *found favor with God*; it is she who is the one God has chosen!

The Greek verb translated "highly favored" is found only one other place in the New Testament (see Eph. 1:6), where it refers to God's favor to believers through Christ and is translated "made us accepted." Just as we are highly favored through our union with Christ, so Mary was highly favored to be able to bring Him into the world.

4. God still invites faithful people to assist with His work. What can you do in the coming week to respond? How might you have to rearrange your priorities to serve Him best?

There is no shortage of challenges to service in the pages of the Bible! Undoubtedly the most significant thing any of us can do is to share with others the good news of God's redemptive love (Matthew 28:19, 20). The Bible specifically mentions that we should care for the neediest (James 1:27). The list goes on.

The problem is not a shortage of ministry opportunities, but a perceived shortage of time. Those who live in Western democracies can find themselves buried under an avalanche of opportunities for entertainment, with little time left for substantive service to God. Correcting this imbalance requires careful reflection on priorities and perhaps even repentance.

5. What are some limitations that people believe hinder them from serving God? How may God view such limitations?

Sometimes we may think, "If only I had this or that, I would give it to God." We should recall that God makes clear in the Parable of the Talents that He looks to see who is serving faithfully with what they have. To faithful people He entrusts more (Matthew 25:14-23). The case of Gideon shows us that God may impose severe

limitations so that we really know that He is the one who is accomplishing something and not human strength (Judges 7:1–8).

Mary was a poor girl of no social or academic significance. Yet God chose her to be an essential figure in the most pivotal event of human history. God sees us, knows our hearts, and can empower those of us who are devoted to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9). While sin can keep us from achieving God's purposes for our lives, our own frailties cannot (2 Timothy 2:20, 21).

II. GOD'S MESSAGE (Luke 1:31–33)

6. Why was it essential that Mary's child be truly human (v. 31)?

Gabriel became specific with Mary when he told her that she would bear a son and name Him "Jesus." All the language he used pointed to a birth by normal biological processes. "Conceive," "womb," and "bring forth" (Luke 1:31) all indicate that Jesus would come into the world like all children. Had the angel said no more, Mary could have assumed that there would be nothing unusual about the promised child.

Gabriel did not stop there, though. As he had revealed when speaking to Zacharias (Luke 1:13), Gabriel now revealed to Mary what her child should be named (v. 31). "Jesus" is the equivalent of the Old Testament "Joshua," which means "Yahweh is salvation." Though Mary was not told why He should be called this, the angel later told Joseph it was because "he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). He would thus become a true human with a human name but accomplish what only God could do. This was essential to His appointed task of dying for the sins of the human race (see Rom. 8:3; and Heb. 2:9–15).

7. What did Gabriel say to indicate Jesus prominence (v. 32)?

The angel understood the importance of Mary's destiny by telling her the destiny of her son. He would be far from ordinary. In fact, He would be "great." Gabriel had earlier declared that John, the forerunner, would be "great in the sight of the Lord" (vs. 15), but he stated Jesus' greatness without any qualification. Eventually John himself would acknowledge Jesus as "mightier than I" (3:16) and "preferred before me" (John 1:27).

Gabriel also said that Jesus also would be called "the Son of the Highest" (Luke 1:32). This linked Him with Melchizedek's "most high God, possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19). While John the Baptist could be called "the prophet of the Highest" (Luke 1:76), Jesus was the Son of the Highest. Being His Son implied no inferiority, for "son of" in Hebrew always implied identity and equality. Mary's child would be divine as well as human—God's Son and David's son at the same time.

8. What part of Jesus' destiny has not yet been fulfilled (v. 33)?

Even with his humanity, Jesus had a glorious destiny, indeed—to rule on David's throne (Luke 1:32). He was the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, who would fulfill in its final form God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:3–4, 28–29).

In His messianic role, Jesus would "reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:33). In these words Mary must have recognized a fulfillment of Isaiah 9:6–7. A child would be born and a son given; and this One could justly claim to be the wonderful Counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, and Prince of peace. He would rule in justice on David's throne forever. Both Israel and humanity would find their ultimate fulfillment in Him.

This messianic role of Jesus has not yet reached its final fulfillment. It awaits His second advent, when He will purge this wicked earth, transform creation, and reign for a thousand years. Then He will extend His rule into eternity to come, and all the prophecies of the ages will find fulfillment in Him. Mary, of course, could not know all these details, but it must have dawned on her that Gabriel was saying she would bear Israel's Messiah!

III. MARY'S RESPONSE (Luke 1:34–38)

9. What was Mary's question for Gabriel? How did it differ from that of Zacharias (v. 34)?

Mary was perplexed at the angel's greeting. She was even more perplexed by his message. It raised many questions, but for her the most immediate was "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" Mary was engaged to be married but as yet had not had intimate relations with a man. So how could she become the mother of the Messiah?

She asked the natural question of Gabriel: How could she be a mother of a son if there was no father? Mary's question differed from that of Zacharias because his grew out of unbelief: "Whereby shall I know this?" (Luke 1:18). He needed a sign to prove the promise would be fulfilled. But Mary did not doubt; she merely asked for more information: How was God going to do this? So her questions brought no rebuke. Instead, Gabriel gave her the explanation she sought and eventually a sign (which she had not sought).

10. What sign did Gabriel give that his words would be fulfilled (vs. 35-37)?

Gabriel thus gave Mary the explanation she had asked for. But he also gave her a sign, for which she did not ask—the pregnancy of her dear relative Elisabeth (Luke 1:36).

How could Mary know God would accomplish through her a miraculous conception and virgin birth? He had already begun to work a miracle in the body of Elisabeth. She had been called barren, but this was the sixth month of her pregnancy! She would have a son in her old age.

The miracles in the two women were not identical, but both illustrated the truth that "with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). More literally, this text reads, "For no spoken word from God will be without power." God's promises are always accompanied with His power to fulfill them. He had now spoken twice, once to Zacharias and once to Mary. Elisabeth was a sign of His power to fulfill both promises. Thus, Mary was assured of the truth of Gabriel's message.

11. What lessons can we learn from Mary's submission (v. 38)?

Mary displayed her remarkable faith not only by believing the divine promise but also by submitting humbly to her appointed role. We can only imagine the questions that swirled through her mind. How would she cope with the almost certain ostracism from the community that her pregnancy would bring? How would she ever explain it to Joseph, her betrothed? Who would believe such a fantastic story?

Mary was willing to leave these complications with God. After all, she was only His handmaid, committed to carrying out His will. She saw herself as bound by divine ownership and could only reply that she was ready for what she had been told. At that, the angel left her.

Mary's example still stands as a challenge to our faith and obedience. She was called to be God's vessel to bear the Messiah, a calling more honorable than any we can imagine. Yet it entailed complications that required her to cast herself on the Lord's grace.

We too have opportunities to serve Him as useful vessels, with the prospect of blessing and joy. But with every opportunity come circumstances that demand new faith and submission. Only those who say, "Be it unto me according to thy word" will glorify Him and experience His blessing.

CONCLUSION

Chosen Vessel—Willing Vessel

Throughout sacred history, God has chosen men and women to be instruments of His will. He chose Abraham to begin the Jewish nation; He chose Moses to be their lawgiver. He chose the kings to rule them; He chose the prophets to instruct them. All of these were chosen and called to play their significant roles in His plan.

As His plan to save humanity neared a critical point, God chose Mary. He called her to be a chosen vessel, to become the earthly mother of His divine Son. She was young, inexperienced, perhaps naïve. But in her virginal purity she was the right vessel to bring Jesus into the world.

The beauty of Mary's story lies in her willing submission to God's plan. Despite the fact that she could not grasp how everything was to happen, she was willing. Regardless of the physical hardships and the social disgrace she would endure, she was willing. Even though there would be "a problem of explanation" with Joseph, she was willing.

Mary's willing response to God's call is an example for us. God still issues calls to men and women to be used as His holy vessels, and we must respond. He calls us to accept His Son, to become followers, and then to be proclaimers. He calls us to be His vessels—vessels of His love, vessels of His truth, vessels of His power (2 Corinthians 4:7).

PRACTICAL POINTS

God knows all about the details of our lives (Luke 1:26—28).

Unexpected trials help us grow spiritually as we trust God (v. 29).

When God's chooses to reveal His perfect decisions for us, we are encouraged to trust Him (vs. 30—33).

Totally depending on God as we follow Him shows we love Him (v. 34).

The Holy Spirit guides, encourages, and inspires us as we serve God (vs. 35—37).

When we submit to God's will, we serve Him acceptably (v. 38).

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God still calls people to be vessels for Him.

PRAYER

Father, may it be unto us according to Your will. Help us to follow the example of Mary in humble submission. Most of all, fill us again with joy for the coming of Jesus into the world. In His holy name we pray, amen

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

In our December 16, 2007 lesson, we will see that the Holy Spirit was prominent in the lives of a family. John was to be filled with the Spirit from the womb (Luke 1:15). His mother, Elisabeth, was likewise filled with the Spirit (v. 41). His father, Zacharias, was filled with the Spirit (v. 67). Think about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life as you study next week's lesson. Read Luke 1:57–80 in preparation for next week's lesson, "Called to Proclaim." *Good studying!*

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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