

# LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for December 21: For Christmas

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In the conclusion of his fable “The Fox and the Lion,” Aesop stated the moral that “familiarity breeds contempt.” Although that maxim isn’t universally true, it does describe the way things sometimes work. Familiarity might bring awareness of things we were much happier not knowing, and the more you know about someone or something, the less you might like that thing or person.

Let me suggest a parallel thought: Familiarity also can breed apathy. We might hear something so many times it no longer lights the same spark in us it once did.

The biblical story of Jesus’ conception and birth might be “Exhibit A” of that tendency. Most of us could quote the details of the story from memory—the visits by angels to Mary and Joseph, the trek to Bethlehem, the birth of the Savior, the swaddling clothes and the manger, the shepherds, the wise men and all the rest. But is it possible we have heard and read the Christmas story so many times that it doesn’t excite us any more?

As we study Luke 1 and the announcement of the angel to Mary concerning the conception and birth of Jesus, I pray we can begin to see it once again with the excited eyes of fresh discovery.

Luke 1:26 tells us God sent an angelic messenger named Gabriel to visit a young virgin named Mary, in the Galilean town of Nazareth. Gabriel’s

announcement to Mary concerned two events God was bringing together on the world's stage.

First, the angel declared God was working out a great plan, in accordance with an eternal purpose, to bring his own son into the world: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (vv. 32-33).

Second, corresponding to and falling in line with that great eternal plan for the world, God also was working out a great plan and purpose in Mary's own life. Mary herself would be the one to conceive and give birth to God's Son: "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus" (v. 31).

The words the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary contained a number of remarkable messages, but what Mary seemed to be grappling with most of all was the fact that she would give birth while still a virgin (v. 34). After all, even though people living in the 1st century weren't in possession of all the medical and scientific knowledge that we living in the 21st century enjoy, they were not so backward that they didn't understand where babies come from.

Although for the sake of convenience we usually speak of the "virgin birth," the real miracle is not how Jesus was born. He was born by the same natural process of labor and childbirth as every other human baby. No, the real miracle is in how Jesus was conceived—not through the normal process by which children are conceived, but by a direct miraculous act of God. Verse 35 explains the miracle which would take place in Mary's body: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

I am afraid we might not fully appreciate the leaps of faith Mary had to

make in response to this announcement. Aside from the obvious spiritual difficulty she might have had in believing what the angel said to her, there was the very real issue of her human relationships, especially her relationship with her betrothed husband, Joseph. How could she possibly explain it all to him?

We know from the Gospel of Matthew that God took care of that particular problem by another angelic visit, this one to Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25). But at the time, Mary had no idea how it was all going to turn out. Her mind must have been turning cartwheels in her attempts to understand it.

There still are a lot of folks who struggle with the notion of the virgin conception and birth of Jesus. They might think, “I accept the fact that there was a man named Jesus who lived and taught and even worked miracles of healing. But I just cannot accept this idea of the virgin birth.”

Permit me, if you would, a point of personal privilege so that I can try to explain why I believe so strongly in the virgin conception and birth of Jesus.

First of all, I believe it because that conviction is a natural outgrowth of what I believe about the Bible. I believe the Bible accurately records God’s self-revelation and that it contains—to borrow a phrase—“truth, without any mixture of error.” Building on that basic assumption, there can be no argument about this fact: Luke 1 very clearly states Mary was a virgin at the time Jesus was conceived in her.

When we read these verses, it’s not a matter of “What does it mean?”—the meaning is very clear. It is, quite simply, a matter of “Am I going to believe what it says, or not?” For my part, I choose to believe it.

But I believe in our Lord’s virgin conception and birth also because everything else I believe about Jesus makes a belief in the virgin birth necessary.

What I mean by that statement is, I actually believe a lot of things about

Jesus: I believe he is the Son of God, that he lived a sinless life, that he died on the cross for my sins, that he rose again on the third day, that he ascended to heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father and that he still lives to make intercession for me. I believe that by trusting Jesus for salvation, my sins are forgiven, and I am reborn spiritually. I believe that through Jesus, I have life which is eternal.

What's more, those beliefs I hold about Jesus are things I do not believe about any other person who ever lived. And so, if all of those things I believe about Jesus are true, then that means Jesus was essentially different from every other person who has ever lived.

That essential difference between Jesus and every other person who has ever lived lies in the fact that Jesus is both human and divine—both man and God.

And that brings us to the bottom line: If Jesus is both human as well as divine, then a human conception which was a direct act of God is the only possible way to account for his being both. Everything else I believe about Jesus logically requires I also believe in his virgin conception and birth. To put it bluntly, it's the only way to understand the person of Jesus Christ and how he came into the world that makes sense; and it's important that what you believe makes sense.

In simple faith, Mary accepted what the angel had told her: "I am the Lord's servant ... . May it be to me as you have said" (v. 38). Then this young woman who would become the mother of God's son joyfully celebrated the great work that God was doing, and the great favor that God had shown her by choosing her as his vessel for bringing his son into the world (vv. 46-55).

Our own response to the message of Christmas should never be joyless apathy. Just as Mary trusted God and submitted to his plans for her, let us

also commit ourselves to faith and obedience to Christ. As Mary joyfully celebrated God's saving work, let us also live lives of joy and celebration for his great salvation.