

Luke 1:34-38

Sermon: **We want to earn it**

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GOD'S SIGNS

1. (Luke 1:34) *"Since I do not know a man."* 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, as we say, "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."*

1.2. 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 happen¹. And that sign was also a reminder to his neighbors, relatives, and friends that this child would be something special.

1.3. 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

¹ The prophet Ezekiel 3:26–27

God says to the prophet Ezekiel: *"I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, for they are a rebellious people. But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth..."*

Thus, Ezekiel became mute until God restored his speech—very similar to Zechariah.

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.

1.4. 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

1.5. 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."*

1.6. 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 neighbor²!"* 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!

1.7. 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.

1.8. 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.

² 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

2. 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...”*³ And before He acts, He always warns and rebukes that person or nation multiple times.

2.1. 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?”*

2.2. 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. 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. —

2.3. 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.

³ Isaiah 1:2–4; Jeremiah 7:25–26; Amos 4:6–11; Hosea 4:1–3; Ezekiel 18:30–32.

2.4. 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

3. (Luke 1:35) **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”** 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 thinking⁴.

3.1. 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—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. In other words, Yahweh uses His Spirit within our reality to perform miracles—He changes the weather, gives life to all beings, sustains the earth hanging on 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.

3.2. 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. For example: the angels with the heavenly host appearing to the shepherds, the birth of John the Baptist, Jesus walking on water, lepers healed, the blind receiving sight, Jesus feeding thousands—and many others. All of these are signs from God announcing that something of the greatest importance for the Jews and for the rest of humanity is happening now. But they also show that God can take His own laws—those He Himself established in this reality—and redirect them, bend them, align them with the purpose, that

⁴ 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).

is, the plan He wants to accomplish in that moment in our reality. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF THIS REALITY.

ACCEPTING THE ROLE GIVEN BY GOD IS A SIGN OF WISDOM

3.3. **(Luke 1:36)** 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.

3.4. **(Luke 1:37)** 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 is transcendent. 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.

4. **(Luke 1:38)** 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."*

4.1. 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."*

4.1.1. 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.

4.2. 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.