

At the Speed of Angels

The Gospel According to Gabriel – Part II

Luke 1:26-38 & 2:8-14

Introduction

In the early 1830s, two different groups of men, one in America and one in England, were independently racing to build an electric telegraph system. The American group would win the day – with its unique use of magnetic pulses and a special code invented by the group's leader, Samuel Morse.

Samuel was, by occupation, a skilled painter who specialized in portraits. However, by the late 1800s, his invention took the world by storm. Electric telegraph companies were soon in operation.

If you can imagine, less than 150 years ago, the fastest way to send a message from New York to California was to use the Pony Express, which took ten days. If you can imagine, less than 150 years ago, the fastest way for someone on the East coast to get a message to someone on the Left Coast, was to use a horse and a rider.

This would completely change. With the invention of Samuel Morse and the creation of his Morse code, this distance could be spanned at nearly the speed of light.

The Wright Brothers would use this method in 1903 to send a telegram to their father that December telling him about their first flight.

I was able see a picture of this telegram. In fact, I saw a picture of the very first telegram. It was dated May 24, 1844. On this historic day, Samuel Morse made the first public demonstration of his telegraph by sending a message from the Supreme Court Chamber in the United States Capitol to a station in Baltimore. His famous message was four words, "What hath God wrought."

In other words, "Look what God has done!"

It is fascinating to see the inventive abilities of mankind, and on this occasion, Samuel Morse gave his Creator God the credit.

Morse's invention would be in used for more than 150 years of communication. Then, on January 27, 2006, the last batch of telegrams was transmitted by Western Union. Other forms of communication had finally put it to rest.

If you can imagine, today the number of text messages sent every day exceeds the world's population – billions every day. I believe it – my youngest daughter is responsible for 100 million of them!

Well, the last telegrams sent in January of 2006, included condolences on the death of a loved one, emergency news, birthday wishes, and messages from several people trying to be the last one to send a telegram.

Can you fathom the ways communication methods in our world have so improved in 150 years?

However, to this day, there is one communication system that only God has access to. He has message delivery by angel service – "angelgrams".

These travel faster than the speed of light. They are never lost in transmission, they never fail to be delivered, and they are never coded, which means that everyone who hears these divine bursts of information can understand.

The number of angels is so vast that no one can comprehend the total. Their power is remarkable; the Bible records that one single angel killed 185,000 enemy soldiers in one night (II Kings 19:35).¹

Micaiah the prophet reported his vision in I Kings 22 of the angelic hosts surrounding the throne of God.

If we literally multiply Daniel's accounting of angels around the throne of God, we have his vision of 100 million angels worshiping God.

We are told the same number of angels, 100 million and more will sing praise to God around His magnificent throne (Revelation 5).

These numbers are probably intended to be symbolic of a numberless throng of angels who raise their voices in worship.ⁱⁱ

The writer of Hebrews informs us that thousands upon thousands are in joyful assembly in the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22).

Now, if you were God and you wanted to deliver the birth announcement of God the Son to the world, how would you deliver the message?

What better way than by angels? And not just by angels, but by one particular angel.

This one angel was blessed with the singular task of informing all the critical parties involved that God was moving the redemptive plan to the next stage. The name of this special angel messenger was Gabriel.

Daniel described him with eyes blazing as if they were on fire, with arms and feet that shone like burnished bronze, with a lightning appearance, and with an amazing, deep majestic voice.

This angel Gabriel broke the silence of God that had lasted four hundred years by appearing to an old priest named Zacharias and delivering the gospel of the coming Messiah.

Messages from the Angel Gabriel

Let us turn to Luke's Gospel to discover Gabriel again appearing.

Gabriel's message of grace and greatness to Mary

This time Gabriel will deliver a message to a young teenage girl in the middle of her "kiddushin," which was the customary Jewish betrothal period. Mary is engaged to a young carpenter named Joseph.

Notice Luke 1:26.

Now in the sixth month (that is, of Elizabeth's pregnancy), the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth,

Do not miss the significance of the phrase,

. . . *Gabriel was sent from God . . .*

Imagine this conversation:

"Gabriel."

"Yes, my King."

"Deliver My message personally to that specific girl down there in that specific village called Nazareth."

"When shall I deliver it?"

"Wait a moment . . . wait just another moment . . . now Gabriel, at this moment in redemptive history, deliver the message."

Gabriel then wings his way from the highest heaven, crossing the universe far faster than the speed of light – at the speed of angel's flight.

Notice that when Gabriel arrives, he does not ask Mary to wait a minute while he catches his breath.

Not only do we not understand the communication methods in the heavenlies, we do not understand flight patterns. What we do know is that God ordered and Gabriel appeared.

Look at Luke 1:28.

And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Poor Mary nearly faints, so Gabriel has to say what angels are always saying to people they encounter, in Luke 1:30,

. . . *"Do not be afraid . . ."*

Then Gabriel gives the message,

". . . you have found favor with God."

Imagine the word "grace," or "charis," coming from the mouth of an angel.

In other words, "Mary, you are the recipient of unmerited, undeserved grace from God."

This is the gospel – God has visited man and offered to him undeserved favor. The day of "charis" – the day of grace – had come.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, not only is Gabriel's message a message of God's grace, it is a message of God's greatness. Let us look at the sovereign control of people and events and history past, present, and future.

Notice the way Gabriel speaks so matter-of-factly, beginning with Luke 1:31,

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;

and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.

Gabriel is just laying it all out. There is no problem with him for all of this to take place. Why? He has just come from the throne of God.

Ladies and gentlemen, the closer you and I live to the throne of God, the less of a problem we will have with His sovereign control and power as well.

Mary has just heard the stunning news that she will bear the Messiah. Gabriel has loosely quoted II Samuel chapter 7 and the Davidic covenant. Not only are the first four assertions by Gabriel coming true, the last three assertions will come true as well.

Jesus will mount the throne of David one day. He will one day rule, just as surely as He became a literal son of a literal teenage girl who named Him Jesus.

You may remember that Gabriel had announced earlier to Zacharias that his wife would get pregnant and bear the forerunner of the Messiah.

Gabriel now announces to Mary that she will become pregnant and bear the Messiah.

It occurred to me, as I studied this text again, that in the first encounter, Gabriel would inform Zacharias that his wife, Elizabeth, who could not get pregnant, will.

Now, in this second encounter, Gabriel is informing Mary, who should not be pregnant, that she is about to be.

Elizabeth could not get pregnant, but would.

Mary should not be pregnant, but will be.

Mary staggers under the weight of this news; especially this part – notice Luke 1:34,

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

You may remember earlier that Zacharias responded to Gabriel's announcement with the word, “How?”

Now, Mary responds by asking, “How?”

Zacharias will be disciplined with the inability to hear or speak for nine months. But Mary is not disciplined for unbelief. This is because they asked two different kinds of questions.

For Zacharias, it was a question of belief; for Mary, it was a question of biology. Zacharias wanted more proof; Mary wanted to understand the process.

Besides, it is one thing to tell an older woman that she is pregnant; it is another thing to tell a virgin that she is pregnant.

How does this happen?

Gabriel, who evidently had been given more information than he reveals in this message, is able to answer Mary's questions in an amazingly articulate manner. Evidently, God had given Gabriel the inside story.

Notice 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.”

The Greek word “overshadow” is the same word that is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the overshadowing presence of God in the holy of holies.

Warren Wiersbe said it this way, “Mary's womb would become a holy of holies for the Son of God.”^{iv}

You might think, “Mary must have been perfect; she must have been sinless for God's Son to indwell her and the Spirit of God to overshadow her.”

Have you forgotten?

Your body is now the temple of the living God? (I Corinthians 6:19 paraphrased)

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him . . . (I John 4:15)

Just as Mary's womb became the holy of holies, so is your heart – for God has made your body His temple.

Just as Mary carried Christ physically, so we bear Christ spiritually. You, Christian, are carrying the Messiah today wherever you go.

Why? Because you are perfect? Because you are sinless? How can you be honored to carry within you the holy God?

You can do this by becoming like Mary – a recipient of undeserved, unmerited grace and favor from God.

This is the gospel according to Gabriel – delivered to Mary – and us.

So, what did Mary do? Luke 1:38 records her testimony.

. . . “Behold, the bond slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” . . .

Mary surrendered.

Understand that Gabriel's message for Elizabeth was good new without any bad news. His message to Mary was good news surrounded with bad news.

This was no simple matter. Mary was being asked to reveal to her family and to Joseph that she was carrying a child and it was not his. In standing up for God and His power and plan, she will become the object of doubt and ridicule and slander.^v

The *Talmud*, which is the second century compilation of Jewish laws and commentary and traditions, includes the record that Mary was the mistress of a Roman soldier named Panthera and that Jesus was illegitimate. This story had spread and by the time of Christ's ministry, the Pharisees said to Him,

. . . “We were not conceived in sexual immorality as You were . . . You do not even know who Your father is.”
(John 8:41 paraphrased)

Christ never outlived the whispers. This meant Mary never lived down the accusation – she would always be in the rumor mill.

Mary would surrender to a life of mistaken identity. She would be viewed as someone she was not.

However, Mary said, in effect, to Gabriel, “Wing your way back through the universe and up to the throne of my Lord and tell Him, ‘I accept! I will cooperate with God.’”

Mary presented her body a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which was the most reasonable service she could ever perform.

What has God asked you to do that is inconvenient and upsetting and uncomfortable? What has He asked you to surrender?

Gabriel's message of the gospel to the shepherds

Let us leave this scene for one final scene where I believe the messenger is Gabriel again, though this time he is not identified.

In Luke's account in chapter 2, Gabriel appears again, using the same introduction as with Zacharias and Mary and even using the profound word “euangelizomai,” which translated means, “the gospel – good news”.

Gabriel stands before the shepherds and in Luke 2:10 says,

... “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news [the gospel] of great joy . . .”

Gabriel is not talking to just any shepherds, but to temple shepherds.

To see that the supply of unblemished lambs were always available, the temple authorities had their own private flocks; and we know from historical records that these flocks were kept near Bethlehem. Zacharias has seen lamb after lamb taken from these flocks and offered at the morning and evening sacrifices in the temple.

Imagine – Gabriel is announcing to shepherds who were looking after the temple lambs that *the* final sacrificial lamb had just been born.

These are the keepers of lambs destined to die as sacrifices for the sins of the people; and they will soon be the first to witness the birth of the Lamb of God who will permanently take away the sins of His people.^{vi}

By the way, according to the Jewish traditions recorded in the *Mishnah*, shepherds could not worship in the temple. They were consistently unclean, dealing with blood and dead animals, and were living outdoors, often stealing to survive, and were unable to come into the temple precinct.

According to the *Mishnah*, the only class of people lower than shepherds was lepers.^{vii}

It is as if God gives a foretaste of the redemptive grace of Christ – delivered to the outcast. Can you imagine the glory of the gospel in this? Notice Luke 2:11.

... today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

This baby is identified three ways:

- The first expression or title is “Savior,” or “soter,” which is a “deliverer”.
- Gabriel announces that this newborn baby is not only the “Savior,” He is the “Christ”. This is the Greek for the Hebrew “Mashiach,” or “Messiah”. This is the anointed One of God.^{viii}

This is the One who is qualified to sit on David's throne.

- Gabriel said that this newborn is also the “Lord,” or “kurios,” literally, God.

Listen to the gospel – the good news – first delivered by Gabriel,

... today in the city of David there has been born for you a deliverer, who is the anointed One, who happens to be God incarnate.

A Jehovah's Witness cannot say this. A Mormon cannot sign on to this. A Muslim cannot agree with this. They can say that Jesus was a Savior, that He

was a prophet, that He was a good man, but they cannot say that He was Savior and Messiah who is God.

Now, do not miss the unmistakable distinction that Gabriel makes between himself and the shepherds. Did you catch it?

... today in the city of David there has been born for ...

For whom?

... you[!]...

For you! Not for angels – for people. A Savior has been born for lepers and shepherds – for sinners like you and me. He was born for people under the ban – for the unclean.

May I suggest that you write your name into the margin of your Bible so that it personalizes the birth of Christ even further – Christ has been born *for you!*

Conclusion

What an announcement! What a series of visitations by Gabriel!

- Gabriel delivered the gospel to the son of Aaron, Zacharias, who was religious and connected and able to enter the Holy Place, but just as needy an unbeliever as anyone. Zacharias was struck deaf and mute to provide the illustration perhaps, of the nation's leaders who will refuse to hear the gospel message and refuse to deliver it to the people.
- Gabriel has delivered the gospel to the ordinary person, who by faith becomes the recipient of the grace of God.
- Finally, Gabriel delivers the gospel to the outcasts who have no hope of being cleansed and accepted. They are unable to worship God – being unclean and dirty.

This is the gospel according to Gabriel – the good news delivered to those who will believe that this One who is wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a dark stable in the Bethlehem night is the same One who asked Job centuries earlier,

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding . . .

"when I made a cloud its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band,"

(Job 38:4, 9)

Imagine – the One who wrapped the universe in darkness as He birthed it by His word is now lying in a manger in swaddling clothes, under the dark sky of Bethlehem.

And one particular angel is scurrying about delivering the “angelgrams” at God the Father’s bidding.

Then, at last, Gabriel is joined by a host of angels. Luke’s gospel informs us, in Luke 2:13, an untold number suddenly appear.

One commentator argues that every angel would have been present – for just as they had sung at the birth of the created universe, so they will not be absent to sing at the birth of their Creator.

It was the Jewish custom for fathers to hire musicians to sing at their home in celebration of the birth of a son. Mary and Joseph have no connections – no relatives to come by; no musicians to hire.

This is all right, however. The Father has connections; the Father will not hold back. Above Bethlehem, the angelic hosts celebrate the birth of God’s Son and the glory of this gospel. The heavens are literally packed with angels singing glory to God.

With this, the gospel announcements of Gabriel and the angels come to an end. “Angelgrams” are no longer God’s method of communication. He has given us the privilege to,

Go . . . and make disciples of all the nations...
(Matthew 28:19a)

It is up to us, who are inhabited by the Messiah, to sing glory to God in the highest and to invite all who will by faith believe in this Savior, who is Christ; who is God incarnate.

All who will believe, will one day, according to Revelation 19, join with all the redeemed and the hosts of heaven in singing praise to God our Father and Christ our Redeemer, our Savior our Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/23/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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¹ A. S. Joppie, All About Angels, (Baker, 1953), p. 12.

ⁱⁱ Herbert Lockyer, All the Angels in the Bible (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Phillips, Exploring the Gospel of Luke (Kregel, 2005), p. 66.

^{iv} Warren Wiersbe, Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13 (Victor Books, 1988), p. 14.

^v Darrell L. Bock, The NIV Application Commentary: Luke (Zondervan, 1996), p. 58.

^{vi} William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 23.

^{vii} R. Kent Hughes, Luke, Volume 1 (Crossway, 1998), p. 87.

^{viii} R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel (Augsburg, 1946), p. 131.