

What Was Nazareth Like?

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. The angel came to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women."

When she saw him, she was troubled by his words, and considered in her mind what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Listen, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest. And the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of His kingdom there will be no end."

Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Luke 1:26-34).

In Genesis 3:15, God preaches against Satan and offers the first hope of salvation: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he will bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel."

God's answer to human sin, rebellion and folly is a Son who will come through the daughter of Eve. There will be a battle between this Son and Satan, and although the Savior Son will be wounded, the deceiving dragon will be defeated. That was the promise. Ever since that terrible day when sin entered the world, God's people eagerly anticipated the birth of the chosen Son, the one who would conquer Satan, sin, death, hell and the wrath of God to be our Savior, be our forgiver, be our

deliverer.

Throughout history, God reminded his people of this great promise, providing additional details along the way. Regarding when, Malachi said the Messiah would come to the temple before it was destroyed in A.D. 70 (Mal. 3:1). Regarding where, Micah said he would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). Regarding how, Isaiah said, “the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14b). And from Luke we learn that the virgin’s name was Mary.

Based on how Luke tells her story and describes his research, it is likely that he actually sat down with Mary, an older woman by that time, to ask her questions about her miraculous life. She is a relative of Elizabeth, but when Luke picks up the narrative Mary does not yet know that her elderly cousin is pregnant. Mary is simply a young woman, living a quiet life in a rural village called Nazareth.

Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament. It’s not mentioned in other significant historical texts because historically it was an insignificant town. Nathanael summed up the reputation of this town when asking in John 1:46a, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” I have been to Nazareth, and according to the archaeologists and historians who led our tour, it was home to somewhere between a few dozen to a few hundred people. It seems to have had only one well, which means it could not sustain a large population base. Mary and Jesus would have drawn water from that well while chatting with relatives and neighbors, as everyone in that small town would have known one another and depended upon one another.

Have you ever been on a long road trip and stopped in the middle of nowhere to get gas, grab a snack, use the bathroom, clean the bugs off your windshield, and get out as fast as you can, thankful you don’t have to live there? That’s Nazareth.

After his visit with Zechariah within the sacred walls of the

temple in Jerusalem, where does God send the angel Gabriel to next? Nazareth. To meet with a girl nobody had ever heard of.

Mary was very young at the time—as young as age 12—but she was betrothed to be married to a man named Joseph. A lot has been said about this couple, especially every year at Christmastime. There is so much lacquer on the story that it's hardly recognizable, so we have to sand it down a bit to get to the truth.

Joseph was also probably fairly young and poor, working as a carpenter in Nazareth. Joseph and Mary likely grew up together, their families would have known each other, and maybe Joseph had a little crush on her since they were little kids. He's working hard, trying to save up enough money to marry the girl of his dreams. Think poor teens in a small rural town, and you are probably close to reality.

That girl, Mary, was possibly illiterate, since very few rural young women were formally educated in that day. Her connection to God included singing, praying and remembering the Scripture she had heard in synagogue. Unlike the matronly depictions common in medieval artwork portraying Mary as a pampered princess, she was actually a peasant girl with a simple well-worn dress and dirty hands and feet from manual chores.

Almost all of the theologians I've read believe Mary was somewhere between 12 and 14 years old. Let that sink in. How many parents don't trust their teenagers with a phone—let alone raising the Lord of the universe? Even with a seatbelt and an airbag, we still don't feel 13-year-olds are capable of handling a car. But God is likely born to a junior high-aged girl.

The fact that the couple was “betrothed” meant that Joseph and Mary had pledged to marry each other, an arrangement far more serious and binding than what we understand as engagement today. Terminating a betrothal required divorce proceedings,

though a betrothed couple would not live together or consummate until after marriage. Together with their families, Joseph and Mary would have been anticipating a humble, joyful wedding ceremony.

What young woman in your life do you need to encourage to follow in the example of Mary by pursuing purity and godliness? {eoa}

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