THE BIRTH OF JESUS FORETOLD

Luke 1:26–38

Key Verses: 1:30–31

“And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.’”

 Are you familiar with the expression, “Will you do me a favor?” It means to do a small kindness or offer a little help in the ordinary activities of life. When somebody asks this so kindly, it’s kind of hard to say no, right? We see a similar experience in today’s passage. But this event isn’t casual at all. What God is asking of Mary is what people today would call “a big ask”—*very* difficult, and, *very* demanding. Yet this sweet word “favor” is used. In agreeing to this, is Mary doing God a favor? Not at all. Today we want to think especially about the meaning of this word, “favor.” What did “God’s favor” mean in Mary’s case? What does “God’s favor” mean to us? We also want to learn from the angel’s words more about who Jesus is and why these truths about him are so crucial to know. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

 Look at verses 26–27. In his beautiful use of language, Luke turns from the story announcing the miraculous birth of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son to the story of someone else’s birth. The scene changes from the holy and grand temple in Jerusalem, the center of the nation, to Nazareth in Galilee, a backwater region. Nazareth is roughly half-way in between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. At that time it was a station for Roman soldiers and tax collectors and a center for local agriculture. Nazareth was despised and even considered unclean due to its Gentile associations (cf. Jn1:46).

And as this place becomes the scene, the main character is not an elderly priest but a virgin named Mary. The word “virgin” specifically meant a young girl who had never been with a man. This virgin Mary, however, is already “betrothed.” In their culture, girls around 12 or 13 years old would be introduced to an eligible young man. There would be a betrothal ceremony for the two families, then the young couple would live apart for about a year until they were married. In Mary’s case, she was promised to Joseph, who, it says, was “of the house of David.” It means Joseph was a direct descendant of King David. Mary’s family is not even mentioned. Her only significance at this point is that she’s in the process of marrying into David’s royal lineage. Other than that, she’s just an ordinary, young, pre-teenaged girl.

What would be going through the mind of such a young person as her? She probably was learning more about all the practical duties she’d need for her new life—cleaning, cooking, babysitting for neighbors. And from the general tone of the passage, Mary doesn’t seem to be dreading what’s about to happen—quite the contrary, it seems she’s really looking forward to it. A sweet young lady like herself likely would be full of happy dreams of her upcoming new life with Joseph: learning to be his wife, having their own home, becoming a mother for their children. To many a father, it would be a sad time to prepare to send such a lovely daughter away. But on the grander stage of human history, this virgin Mary certainly isn’t impressive, or even very noteworthy.

But what happens? God sends this same archangel Gabriel, whom he sent to Zechariah, to her (26,27). Look at verse 28. “And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’” It’s an exclamation, meaning there’s excitement. She’s addressed as “O favored one” and “the Lord is with you.” It means she is so important to God. What a surprise!

So what’s going on here? The key word is that she’s “favored.” In fact, in Greek the words “greetings” and “favored” both have the same root: “charis.” It’s a very special word. So instead of translating it as “greetings,” some English translations actually have the angel telling her, “Rejoice, O favored one!” It’s because this word “charis” can be translated as “grace,” or as “thanks,” or as “joy.” What a beautiful word! Luke uses this root Greek word 46 times, which tells us how important it is to him. Sometimes it’s translated as “favor,” sometimes as “grace,” sometimes as “joy” or “rejoice,” sometimes as “greetings” (Lk1:14(2X),28,30,58; 2:10,40,52; 4:19; 6:23; 8:13; 10:17,20(2X); 13:17; 15:5,6,7,10; 19:6,37; 24:41,52; Ac2:47; 4:33; 6:8; 7:10,46; 8:8; 11:23; 12:14; 13:43,52; 14:26; 15:3,11,23,31,40; 18:27; 20:24,32; 23:26; 24:27; 25:3,9). The general idea is that when we receive God’s favor, God’s grace in our lives, our souls are filled with joy. What a great way to greet each other: “Rejoice, O favored one!”

So how does Mary respond? Look at verse 29. This is even more intense than Zechariah’s initial response (12). The angel has such a positive, joyful greeting. Why is she so “greatly troubled”? These words literally mean “alarmed,” “disturbed,” “thoroughly shaken,” or in today’s expression, “freaking out.” It suggests that Mary’s heart is already full. She’s already got many plans in her mind with Joseph. She’s probably full of sweet dreams that anyone in her place would have. The angel’s sudden greeting is invasive, intrusive. Though she’s young, Mary rightly senses God is asking something of her. It’s scary.

How does the angel help her? Read verse 30. Mary has found favor with God. But what does this mean? To human eyes, she may be cute but she’s no one special; she’s just a pre-teen girl. But to God she’s so precious. To God, she’s just the right person. God made her, protected her, nurtured and prepared her for a very special task. God’s favor is not just that he takes a liking to us or gives us some special privileges. His favor is his gracious choice to use our lives in some way for his greater salvation work. We also notice that Mary isn’t seeking God’s favor; God is bestowing it on her of his own initiative.

Basically, God’s favor is his one-sided grace, which no one could ever deserve. It eliminates any potential for pride. We don’t have such an epic spiritual experience or calling as Mary did. But as believers in Jesus the Bible tells us we’re all recipients of God’s favor, God’s grace. As Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 1:5, through Jesus we’ve all received grace and apostleship.

Still, it’s so easy to see our lives from a human point of view. Sometimes we think we’re doing great; but mostly we feel like we’re in the pits. We compare ourselves with others and feel superior or inferior. We may feel like life has dealt us a raw deal, like we’ve gotten the short end of the stick, a brutal kind of destiny. We can dwell on our hardships, sufferings or sacrifices and feel burned out and used up. We can foolishly pursue fleeting things and fill up our lives with lots of human endeavors that, in the grand scheme of things, don’t really matter. When we pass from this life, who’s going to care about our personal achievements or possessions or fancy experiences? Wouldn’t it be so much more meaningful if people knew that God used our lives for something greater than ourselves?

We all need “the eyes of our hearts to be enlightened” to see God’s great calling and hope and inheritance for us in our Lord Jesus (Eph1:18). We need to see what a great blessing and privilege it is for our lives to be used by God for his life-saving purpose. So, even this day, we need to welcome God’s favor into our lives all over again, wholeheartedly, by faith. When we do, we gain a whole new perspective, and, a new spirit.

God’s favor for Mary was very specific. Read verse 31. This very young woman is going to be the mother of Jesus. As we’re going to see, it’s no easy task. She’ll have to conceive him not after marrying Joseph, but before they come together. This surely will mean great misunderstanding, at the bare minimum, and perhaps, even losing the chance to marry and having a normal life. It means being looked down upon by those who know her. In the future it will mean the heartache and pain of watching what will happen to her son (2:35). Still, it’s God’s favor, God’s special grace in her life. The same is true for us. It’s always God’s beautiful grace that enables us to do the hard things God asks of us. We need to see even these hard, painful things as God’s favor, his grace.

To help her further, the angel tells her more. Read verses 32,33. This is the first time in Luke’s Gospel that we learn something directly about Jesus. His name means, “the Lord saves.” Luke will say much more about this “salvation” (Lk1:69,71,77; 2:30; 3:6; 8:12; 19:9,10; 23:35,37,39; Ac4:12; 13:26,47; 16:17; 28:28). But here the angel highlights two other things about Jesus. First, he’s going to be the greatest because he’ll be “the Son of the Most High.” We’ll think more about that in a moment. Second, he’s going to be the promised King like David, but he’s going to reign forever—his kingdom will never end. To be used by God to be his earthly mother will become famous as the greatest blessing any mother ever had (1:42). Many ambitious mothers want something great for their children. But Mary wasn’t seeking this at all. So God gave it to her as his grace.

How does she respond? Look at verse 34. Though she’s young, she at least knows that to conceive a child, she needs a man. Perhaps she’s hoping it might be through Joseph, who, after all, is “of the house of David.” But it was not to be. Read verse 35. It’s a crucial point that Jesus was conceived not in the ordinary way, but by the Holy Spirit. This kind of conception made Jesus fully human and yet, unlike every other human being who ever lived, without sin. This also tells us that Jesus is fully God. Through the mysterious and powerful work of the Holy Spirit, the Eternal God took on human flesh in the womb of Mary. To be our Savior, Jesus had to be fully human, without sin, and at the same time, fully God. This is what makes him the mediator between sinful men and the Holy God (1Ti2:5). For it to happen, Mary didn’t need to understand it all, she just needed to trust God. To encourage her, the angel goes on to say more. Read verses 36,37. The point is, God can do the impossible. This always needs to be our faith. We always need reminding that “nothing will be impossible for God.”

And how does Mary respond? Read verse 38. What a reaction! No calculation. No hesitation. No reservation. She’s so young, but she’s ready to obey, ready to serve God with her life, regardless the cost. As they used to say in the 80’s, it’s “rad”—stunning, outstanding, awesome! Of course Jesus is the main point here. He’s our Savior, our eternal King, the holy Son of God, our Mediator. But Mary’s decision cannot be ignored. And remember, she was probably just 12 or 13 years old. For Luke, it’s the overlooked people, such as women and children, who are are way more important than we may think, if only they have faith. And as someone once said, “One act of faith is worth more than 10,000 theological arguments.” Mary shows us all how to actually respond to God’s favor: believe what God says and act based on his word. It’s simple.

Today we mainly thought about God’s favor. May God open our hearts to see his great favor, his one-sided grace in our lives. May his favor to us in Jesus dispel all our fears, worries and complaints. May his favor give us the grace and strength to accept his plan to use us for his greater purpose. Though it still involves pain, suffering and sacrifice, may his favor help us see what a great blessing it is to be used by God. No matter what we’re going through, may God fill our souls with his grace, his joy, and with humble gratitude to him.