

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **A Blessed Life**

Luke 1:26-38

"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (v. 28). Gabriel's announcement to Mary sounds like the unexpected arrival of blessing. One person has compared it to having Ed McMahon and representatives from Publishers Clearing House show up at your door to announce that you've won a million dollars.<sup>1</sup> Sounds like Mary's life has just taken a major turn, and her future looks bright indeed.

So why, then, is Mary "greatly troubled" by Gabriel's message? (v. 29). Isn't this out-of-the-blue declaration of blessedness good news? Isn't this the moment when Mary should start posting an update on her social media page, broadcasting her good fortune, maybe even including a selfie of her and Gabriel? And yet instead, Mary hesitates. She wonders "what kind of greeting this might be" (v. 29).

As we let Gabriel's announcement sink in, we can begin to understand some of Mary's concern. After all, it's not easy being singled out by God for some specific purpose. The Bible includes the reluctant responses of many who were selected by the Lord to play a major role in his redeeming purposes. Moses thought he wouldn't be able to come up with the right words to say to Pharaoh. Isaiah thought he wasn't good enough. Jeremiah thought he was too young. True, Mary doesn't counter Gabriel's message with excuses about why she's not the right person for this job. But she also doesn't plunge right in without reflecting on the implications of saying yes to God's plans.

If she goes along with God's project, what will this mean for the direction of her life? How will it change her relationship with Joseph? How will others in the community view her going forward? This is all too much to process at once. And yet, Mary has been brought up in a religious home. By now, as a teenager, she has already received plenty of instruction in the faith. She has been formed and shaped by the rhythms, traditions, and practices of God's people. She has learned a lot about what it means to trust in the presence and promises of God. She may not have been expecting this specific angelic message, but she knows the God who sent it. She knows that he has shown favor toward his people. And now, she in particular has found favor with God.

I recently spotted a man wearing a shirt with a bold announcement printed on the back: "God's Favorite." Since we were in a public restroom, I decided this wasn't the best time to raise theological questions, but in my mind the wheels of interpretation immediately started turning. Is this just a humorous phrase that others in his family or among his friends would recognize? Is it just a general statement of blessedness? Is it tied to a particular sense of calling or vocation? "God's Favorite"?

"Don't be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God." This doesn't mean that from that point on, Mary strolled around Nazareth in a T-shirt that said "God's Favorite." She and the rest of God's people knew that God's favor, God's blessing, was unmerited. They weren't favored because they had worked harder at righteousness, or were inherently holier, than all the other people on earth. Being favored simply meant they had been the undeserving

recipients of God's call, a call that set them apart for a special purpose in God's project to redeem the whole world.

Today, many people, including lots of believers, assume that those whom God "favors" will experience the kinds of blessings that we equate with the good life. Things like social standing, material prosperity, and good health. In other words, the blessed life is synonymous with the successful life. It's no wonder that use of the word "blessing" or variations of it, as well as the #blessed hashtag, have become so widespread. As one writer has put it, "it appears no feat is off-limits from the #blessed label. People apply this humble-sounding tag to babies, selfies, their legs after a day at the gym, a dozen doughnuts, a wad of \$20 bills." But at the same time, she admits:

Still, on social media I've felt tempted to let the world know that I too travel; I too eat well; I too had a great workout this morning. No, God didn't pass me by when he poured out his blessings. But I can't shake the feeling that adding my own snapshot of some mundane pleasure and tagging it "blessed," ironic or not, would only serve to enlarge the pool of pictures warping its meaning.<sup>2</sup>

We need to be careful with how we use the language of "blessing." It's certainly widespread in our lives as Christians, individually and collectively. "Be blessed." "God bless you." "So blessed." "Have a blessed day." These words come quickly and easily to our lips, especially in the life of the church. We speak them to one another. We even speak them to others beyond the familiar relationships of our congregational family, during the course of our daily lives.

Note also how these words of blessing fit well in the realm of religious merchandising. All kinds of items and surfaces can display the term "Blessed." A wall hanging. A T-shirt. A coffee mug. An ink pen. A tote bag. A piece of jewelry. You name it, and the word "Blessed" can probably be imprinted on it for someone to sell and others to see.

In fact, on her way to visit her cousin Elizabeth, Mary could have swung by the local Walmart and purchased a "Blessed" T-shirt, as a way of announcing her visit from God and her upcoming pregnancy. But Elizabeth didn't need that kind of notification. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, the baby boy in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy, and the Holy Spirit filled her up with words of blessing. She shouted to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" (v. 42). And then, as if that's not enough, Elizabeth adds, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished" (v. 45).

So for Mary, the heart of being "favored" or "blessed" is believing God's word. Yes, it's a blessing to be the physical mother of Jesus. But most of all, she trusts that what God has said will be fulfilled. This is what makes Mary "blessed" among women. It's her receptiveness to and her confidence in the word of God.

The scene in today's text is often referred to as the Annunciation. It's the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would bear the Son of God. It's also one of the most frequent subjects of Christian art. Depictions of it go back to early Christianity, and continue across the centuries up into the present. I noted that there's an image of the Annunciation on the cover of *The Upper Room*, a daily devotional guide that many of you pick up here at our church. This one is a contemporary painting by an artist who lives in France.

Earlier this week, I came across a 1978 depiction of the Annunciation by Theodore Prescott. He used red neon tubing to sketch the outline of Gabriel, capturing the angel's otherworldly quality. This angelic figure flashes on and off. Mary, by contrast, is cast in plaster. She's

dressed as a very earthly housewife, wearing a bandana and Scholl's sandals. She holds her hand over her chest in a gesture of surprise. On the table in front of her sit two loaves of bread.

During the Middle Ages, some depictions of the Annunciation started to include the image of a dove flying toward Mary's ear. The dove symbolized the act of conception which took place in Mary's ear. In fact, centuries earlier, a bishop named Athanasius had said, "Come and gaze upon this marvelous feat: the woman conceives through the hearing of her ears!"<sup>3</sup> The emphasis was on how God's declaration entered Mary and accomplished the divine purpose. It was in the delivering and receiving of God's word that the Savior was conceived and began to take shape in Mary's body and life.

When we reflect on what makes Mary "blessed," we need to remember her obedience to God's word. In fact, today's text isn't the only time that Luke stresses this kind of responsiveness to what God is saying and doing. Later, in chapter 11, after Jesus has driven a demon out of a man, a woman calls out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you" (v. 27). She's basically claiming that Jesus is so wonderful that he's a blessing to his mother. Jesus doesn't deny this blessing on his mother, but seizes the opportunity to say something important about the basis for blessing for all disciples. Our Lord says, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (v. 28).

So true blessedness comes to those who hear the word of God and obey it. That's part of how Mary serves as a model for all disciples of Jesus, including us. Writer Mark Galli says,

... it's not every day that one gets a cold call from a divine messenger. But we do get them from time to time, don't we? Those moments in a sermon or conversation, during a quiet walk in the woods or in prayer, when Someone taps us on the shoulder and says, "Hey you. Yeah you—favored one!" It scares the heebie jeebies out of us. "Me? Favored? By God? You must have mistaken me for someone holy."<sup>4</sup>

Yes, Mary holds a special place in the Christian faith and rightly comes to the fore this time of the year. But her unique role in the Christmas story, and her prominence in the life of the church, also underscore the ways that she is a model of discipleship for all followers of Jesus, especially in her faithfulness to the word of God. The God who speaks into all our lives. The God who calls each of us into our part in his kingdom purposes. The God who summons you and me, so that Christ can be formed in us. The God who blesses us, so that we can be a blessing to others.

But as with Mary, so with us. Having your life claimed by God, for God's purposes, is indeed a blessing, but a strange blessing. A costly blessing. A blessing that requires you to stay open to the word of God, day in and day out, especially when what God is calling you to be and to do is disruptive to your own plans and purposes. In a hashtag blessed culture like ours, we need Mary, who embodies a different kind of blessedness. A blessedness that's not primarily about health, wealth, and success, but about receptiveness to the voice of God and reliance upon his promises. A blessedness that's obedient to God's will and devoted to God's way. "May it be to me as you have said" (v. 38). That's a truly blessed life.

<sup>1</sup> Amy Julia Becker, "Mary Was Greatly Troubled..." Thin Places Blog. July 16, 2009. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/amyjuliabecker/2009/july/mary-was-greatly-troubled.html> (December 7, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Paola Ortega, "How Do We Understand Blessing in a #Blessed Era?" Christianity Today. April 6, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/april-web-only/how-do-we-understand-blessing-in-blessed-era.html> (December 7, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Raffarla Fazo Smith, "Symbolism in the Annunciation." The Global Dispatches... August 4, 2010. <https://www.theglobaldispatches.com/articles/symbolism-in-the-annunciation> (December 8, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Mark Galli, "Me? Favored? By God?" Christianity Today. December 22, 2010. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/decemberweb-only/60-31.0.html> (December 8, 2022).