

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Highly Favored

Luke 1:26-38

In the church, our conversation is often filled with the language of blessing. "God bless you." "Have a blessed day." "God bless America." "I'm a blessed person." These are some of the statements you will hear as people of faith speak about the ways that God is with us. When we want to articulate the presence of God in our lives and in the world, we frequently reach for the language of blessing.

When we talk about being blessed by God, we're usually talking about God's provision, God's guidance, God's protection. "God bless you" is often a way of talking about the things that God can do for us, the things that God can give us. Things for which we should be grateful. Things which we should remember. Things which we should count. As the old hymn says, "Count your many blessings, name them one by one; Count your many blessings see what God hath done."

But while we're taking inventory of God's faithfulness, we should be careful not to equate blessing with material prosperity. Recall that the same hymn also says, "When you look at others with their lands and gold/Think that Christ has promised you his wealth untold/Count your many blessings, money cannot buy/Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high."

In today's Scripture passage from Luke, material prosperity is not at the top of Mary's list of priorities. In fact, it's not even an option. She's simply going about her life as a young Jewish girl, living in the hill country of Judea, doing her daily tasks. There's nothing extraordinary about her. As a female in a remote part of the Roman Empire, she has no power or prestige. She has no career track. Actually, right now, she's on the track to marriage, something which her father has already planned. According to custom, she has little say in the matter. So it appears that her future has already been decided.

But God has other plans. Into Mary's ordinary day comes a messenger of the Lord, who greets her with these words: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (v. 28). These are words of blessing, words of grace, words of favor. Mary is God's favored one. Out of nowhere an angel has arrived to tell Mary that God wants to bless her, and bless her real good!

Notice that God has not chosen someone from among the ranks of those whom the world calls blessed. He doesn't send Gabriel to someone who already appears to have it all, the movers and shakers of society. The messenger doesn't show up at the door of the emperor, or the local governor, or the leaders in religion and commerce. Instead, the word is sent out to a poor village in the middle of nowhere, to a girl who is barely a teenager, whose marriage has already been arranged. This is the one whom God favors.

But when we say that Mary was "favored" or "blessed" by God, we have to be very careful, for this is a strange blessing. Mary's blessedness is not simply a matter of looking in her pantry to see how the Lord has given her daily bread. Her blessedness

also includes, but is more than, the family in which she has been raised and nurtured. It's true that she is blessed to have a roof over her head and food on her table. But according to the Scriptures, she is blessed most of all by the fact that God has invaded her world and her life in order to claim her and to give her a special place in his divine plan.

Think about how costly this blessing is to Mary. She's being called upon to surrender both her body and her reputation in the community. Surely she must wonder how Joseph will react when he finds out that she's pregnant. After all, the law required a severe and humiliating punishment in such cases, perhaps even the death penalty.

Consider also the way things unfold in the rest of Jesus' story. If Mary had any hopes that her son would grow up to lead a normal, peaceful life, all those dreams were shattered by the path that Jesus took in order to follow the will of God. All the disputes that surrounded his preaching and teaching. All the controversy about his association with sinners and his solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. All the clashes with the leaders of his own religious tradition. And of course the turmoil during the final portion of his journey as Jesus entered willingly into suffering and death for the sake of others. As one commentator has noted, Mary "was blessed with having a child out of wedlock who would later be executed as a criminal."¹

Surely there must have been moments when Mary asked herself, "Is this what it means to be favored by God? Is this what it means to be blessed?" You see, Mary's story challenges us to rethink our notions of blessedness. I'm not saying that being blessed has nothing to do with God's provision, guidance, and protection. These things still have an important place in our understanding of blessedness. But all too often, we associate blessedness with social standing, material gain, good health. We frequently look at ourselves or others who are well-respected, prosperous, and comfortable, and conclude that they are the blessed ones. They are the ones experiencing God's favor.

But the story of Gabriel's announcement to Mary overturns our definitions of blessedness. Mary is a blessed person, not because she is always happy, healthy, and wise. Not because she has attained the good life. No, Mary is a blessed person because the Lord has come into the world and laid claim to her life and her future. The Lord has a plan to save the world, and he wants Mary to play a crucial part in this divine project. This is what makes Mary blessed, favored.

And praise the Lord, Mary says yes. Naturally, after Gabriel told her about this strange blessing, Mary "was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be" (v. 29). But God gives her faith greater than her fear. She hears the word of the Lord, accepts the word of the Lord, and offers herself in service to the word of the Lord. She recognizes the Lord's claim on her life and devotes herself to God's great project to redeem the world. When the costly call of God invades her world, she says yes.

This Christmas, my hope and prayer is that you will be a blessed person. Though you can't be Mary, God still has a place in his kingdom for you. God is calling you, summoning you to say yes to your part in his saving plan. Remember that the reign of God still works its way into the world through ordinary people who are willing to obey God's claim on their lives. So with great care and love, I say to each of you, "May God bless you."

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 52.