

Let's look at Mary's story in Luke chapter 1. Listen for the phrase, "highly favored." That's a curious phrase for a Bible story. After all, isn't the point of grace that we all stand in need of mercy, we all stand forgiven, and we are all equally loved? If that's true ... and it is ... then how does a person earn God's favor when we should all already have it? This is how Mary's story begins, in Luke 1, verse 26 (Luke 1:26-28) - *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."* And then he goes on to tell Mary that she gets to be the one to bear the Messiah into the world. Which might *not* sound like a blessing to a fourteen-year old virgin. (It sort of reminds me of how my old friend, Sam Pursley, used to talk about giving. If he had a project he wanted you to give to, he'd say, "I want to give you an opportunity to expand your soul.") Maybe that's something like what the favor of God is. It isn't God treating some of his kids nicer than others. It's God calling some of his kids to greater responsibility. If I'm right about that, then God's favor is not about personal prosperity but about Kingdom purposes. Does that make sense?

"Highly favored" is a God thing. So once again ... it's not about us. It is about God. Favor isn't about me getting a cosmic Santa Claus to give me what I need. Favor is about my entering into the purposes of the Kingdom in this life. So let me say again: Favor does not bear the fruit of personal prosperity; it bears the fruit of Kingdom purposes. Mary was being called to enter into God's plan for her life.

When I heard Lori's song ... the one she sang before the message ... I immediately thought of how Mary would have received those words from Jeremiah. What a profound passage that would have been for a young woman who has just heard that **she** will be the one to bear the Messiah into the world! I don't know that she ever heard that passage but I know she was a righteous person, so I think about her going to the synagogue every week ... listening to the scriptures about the coming Messiah ... trusting that one day God would make good on his word. Believing it so strongly, in fact, that when God did the work of choosing who would bear

this Messiah into the world, she was an obvious choice. Expectancy is a mark of one who is favored, so Mary would be the kind who would see angels when they showed up in her house. Who would hear them when they spoke. She would what the angel is talking about when he came to her and told her God plans to make her the mother of the world's Redeemer.

And I don't know ... after that kind of news ... I think I'd spend a lot more time in church. So I can imagine her going straight from that visit with Gabriel to the synagogue ... trying to get as close to God as she can ... trying to discern every step. How in the world is this is going to work for her ... how in the world will she do this and live? For someone in her culture, in her time, that was a literal question. They could kill her for this. And yet, she knows that she knows it is from God. She has been given the chance to expand her soul. But still ... she's human. So the bigness of it, the mystery of it, had to challenge her faith. And so I imagine her going to the synagogue soon after her visit with Gabriel, to pray and make her offerings. And afterward, she sits there in the synagogue ... waiting ... listening ... trusting ... expecting. And the scripture reading for the day is from Jeremiah. And they unroll the scroll to read from the place where God comforts the Israelites with the assurance that he isn't going to leave them to do this alone ... "I have plans for you. I have not forgotten you, or rejected you, or changed my mind about you. I've not put you out there to get beat up. I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I see Mary hearing that word and receiving it as *life*. In fact, in the New King James Version, Psalm 30, verse 5, reads: "God's favor is for life." I love that line. God's favor is about life. Never mind natural laws or normal consequences. When we are floating in the river of God's will, supernatural things happen. Battles are won and you don't have to fight them. Barriers are demolished. What seems impossible suddenly becomes possible. What would you lose if you began to live ... expectantly rather than fearfully ... as one who is "highly favored"?

I want to ask you to put your hand at the back of your head, where your head meets your neck. That place is the fear center of your brain. This part of our brain is all about survival. When

you're faced with a threat, all your thinking moves back to that place. This part of your brain knows nothing but survival. And while it serves a good function, this is not a great place to live ... mentally or spiritually. Now, put the heel of your hand to your forehead. What do people usually say when they make this gesture? "I get it!" This is the classic "aha!" gesture. It is probably not a coincidence that this front part of our brains is where rational thinking happens. Literally, this is where we "get it." And ... it is as far from our fear center as you can get. This front part of our brains is also where our identity center is. This is where our life purpose is worked out. I don't think it is any coincidence that our identity is worked out up where our reasoning ability is, and not back where our fears are lived. And yet ... how often do we let our fears determine our identity, when clearly, God has not designed it to work that way?

So now ... let me come back to our question: What would you lose if you began to live expectantly instead of fearfully? What if you lived as one favored by God?

That's the first lesson I get from Mary's life ... that she lived expectantly. She lived expecting God to show up. She didn't let spiritual things breed fear. Instead, she brought them forward and embraced them. Go back to her story in Luke. She's sitting in a room with an angel who has just greeted her with the words "highly favored." And it says (Luke 1:29-33) - *29Mary was greatly troubled at his words (she knew this wasn't the lottery, but a calling) and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. (do you hear that? The angels know that fear and favor don't live in the same place) 31You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. (And then this angel, who has come from the unhindered presence of God, explains who Jesus is ... read these next two verses with me ...)* *32He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

Mary has just been invited to become the first Jewish follower of Jesus ... the Messiah. God with us ... given the name *Yeshua* ... which means "Salvation" in Hebrew. Born to a virgin in

Bethlehem, which means "House of bread" ... just as the prophets promised. Through Jesus Christ, God made good on a promise he'd been working out from the beginning of time. Jesus is the part of the on-going love story between God and humanity. And as Mary learned, we are all part of that story ... spiritual children of that promise. So on our way to understanding how to live as one favored by God, **knowing Jesus is the key.** 2 Peter 1:3 says (listen to this) - *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*

Jesus has given us everything we need to move from fear to life. Listen to how Isaiah described the Messiah, when he prophesied his coming hundreds of years before Mary's divine appointment with Gabriel. Isaiah speaks for God, who says (Isaiah 42:1-7) - *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. 2 He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. (this is why Gabriel was sent to announce him, because he would not look like what people expected of a spiritual king) 3 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. (Remember that.) In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; 4 he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. ... The prophet goes on to say that this Messiah will be - ... a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, 7 to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.*

This is the nature of Jesus. He's the one who moves us from mere survival to the fullness of life. He opens the eyes of blind people (and I'm thinking this means spiritually blind people) and sets captives free. He's the one who gets us out of those prisons of darkness. And do you remember what else Isaiah said? He said that this Messiah will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick.

Glenn Penton writes about what that means. In the days of Isaiah, shepherds standing out in the fields ... to pass the time ... would make a simple flute out of a reed. And they'd play it at

night to let predators know that the sheep were not alone out there. But a reed flute being played by a boy-shepherd is not going to last long. It gets bent, stepped on, bruised. It happens. Instead of trying to save a broken flute, the shepherd would toss it and make a new one. Same with their candles. They'd make cheap candles by floating a piece of flax in oil. Flax makes a great flame, but when the oil gets low, the flax falls over into the oil and then you just get smoke. It is easier to make a new candle than to fish out a smoldering flax and repair it.

So Isaiah gives us two little parables. In the Kingdom of God, we are the banged up reeds and the drowning wicks. We are fragile and weak people. Live happens. We get banged up, stepped on, bruised. Our fuel gets low and the fire goes out. We end up face down and smoldering. For all the world cares, we're disposable. "Toss these, and get new ones."

But not for the Messiah. God told Isaiah we would know the Messiah by the way he treats the broken reeds and damaged wicks. The true Messiah will not break them or snuff them out. If you're feeling stepped on or face down and on your way out ... maybe you're in survival mode right now ... living out of your fears ... then this should be great news to you. The Messiah ... Jesus ... invites you forward ... into your identity. Because He has plans for you ... plans not to harm you but to give you a future with hope. Knowing Jesus is the key, because His presence gives us life. He will never reject us or throw us away.

And the best part, to me, is that it doesn't all have to make sense in order for me to trust it. Go back to Mary's story again (Luke 1:34-35, 37-38) - *34"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ... 37For nothing is impossible with God." 38"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.*

The spiritual principle here is this: **Obedience does not depend on "getting it."** Because it was not possible that Mary could understand what the angel was saying. What does it mean to

have the Holy Spirit come upon you (remember ... not very many people had experienced the Holy Spirit at that point)? What does it mean to have the power of the Most High overshadow a person? Mary could not have comprehended what that meant ... but Gabriel wraps it all up with this promise, “Nothing is impossible with God.” And for Mary, that’s enough. “Well then, may it be to me as you have said.” Obedience does not depend on “getting it.”

Abraham Heschel, a Jewish theologian, says, “First we sing. Then we believe.” In other words, it’s okay to sing the song even if you don’t know how to read music. But as we sing, we enter into the Community of the Highly Favored. So you see ... we don’t shape our faith. **Faith shapes us.** This is how it happened with Mary. First she believed, and that shaped who she became. Let me say it again: It is not wrong to move from fear to favor before you have all the answers. On the other hand, as we quoted from John Piper last week, “It is possible to demand too much evidence before you believe God's promises.”

After this episode with the angel ... *after* she accepted this call ... Mary needed someone to help her make sense of it. So she went to visit her aunt Elizabeth. She wasn’t even in the gate yet when Elizabeth cried out (Luke 1:42-45) – “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!*”

“Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.” Blessed are those who are not as interested in personal prosperity as they are in kingdom purposes. Blessed are those who are not afraid of spiritual things. Blessed are those who are ready to let Jesus repair them. Blessed are those who let their faith shape them. Blessed are those who are ready to move from fear to favor.