

About 12 years ago, when Trish and I were really stupid, we decided – no let's take that back – Trish decided that the two of us should take a large inner tube, find a steep snow-covered hill, and go down it at a high rate of speed – just for the fun of it.

So, we drove up past Carson and went back into some hill country looking for the perfect spot, and sure enough we found it. It was long and very steep hill, covered in deep snow, and fortunately, there was no one around to watch us. We climbed up the hill to the top, and then like a golfer evaluating a putting green, I took a lay of the land, taking notice of every little feature and nuance that could turn our joy ride into a disaster.

Now as I analyzed the hill, I noticed there was a nasty looking ramp that was about half way down which was apparently created by a large fallen log covered in snow. I knew that if we hit that ramp, we would be hurled high into the air and God only knew what would happen, so I charted our course – planning to avoid that ramp at all costs. That was the plan – it was a good plan – a sensible plan – what could possibly go wrong?

At the very top, teetering on the edge, I laid down on the large inner tube and then Trish laid down on top of me – and off I pushed. As you may or may not know, an inner tube has a mind of its own – it was uncontrollable, and our plans to avoid that ramp was all for naught. We headed right for it. I tried to bail, but Trish was on top of me, and so we hit that ramp at full speed causing Trish and I to separate in mid-air from each other and also from the inner tube.

I don't know what happened to Trish because I landed flat on my back much further down the hill, but there was a scary moment when, as I was trying to catch the breath that was knocked out of me, her snow boots came down the hill without her. She had apparently hit so hard that her boots shot off her feet.

Both of us just laid there in the snow on our backs, talking to each other where we landed, taking stock of our own bodily functions making sure everything still worked. That was our last run on that hill.

You know, Trish and I will always remember that experience. It wasn't funny back then – it could have ended in a painful disaster, but looking back on it now – it's good for a few laughs.

There is a saying that goes like this, "If you want to make God laugh, just tell Him your plans!" I do think God has a sense of humor and I also think that He is in the habit of changing our plans to His plans.

Last week, we looked at two people named Zacharias and Elizabeth. If you recall, Zacharias was in the temple performing his priestly task of burning incense – a once in a lifetime opportunity for a priest, and while alone in the temple – *poof* – he gets a visit from the angel Gabriel – and bear in mind, that up until that point, heaven had been silent for 400 long years – so this was surely an unexpected surprise for Zacharias.

Anyway, Zacharias gets a baby announcement from Gabriel, that in his ripe old age – maybe in his 80's, maybe in his 90's, he was going to be a dad for the very first time. His wife Elizabeth, who had been barren all her life is going to bear a son, and he would be called *John* – the one we know as *John the Baptist*.

No doubt, this was great news for this elderly couple, especially Elizabeth who goes so far to later say:

“This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.”

As I explained last week, in the Jewish culture, Elizabeth had endured much **disgrace** due to her inability to have children, but now after her disappointment, she *feels* favored by God in her old age. The truth was – and we can't miss this – even when she was barren, Elizabeth *was in* God's favor – she just confused God's favor with God's timing, and that's an easy mistake for us to make as well.

Don't assume that God has abandoned you, don't assume that God does not care for you, don't assume you have fallen out of God's favor because God's plans and His timing are not in sync with your plans and you're timing. Don't make that mistake. As Christians, only by the grace of God, we are in His favor no matter what He chooses to do or not to do on our behalf.

Well, if you remember the rest of the story, after this birth announcement from the angel Gabriel, Zacharias wanted a sign because it all seemed too good to be true – he didn't believe it – having a baby was not part of any plan they had made for themselves, so as a sign, because of his lack of faith, Zacharias loses his ability to speak until John is born.

Now, as we continue with the story, Elizabeth withdraws from the public – she's in the sixth month of her pregnancy, but the angel Gabriel is not done making baby announcements, and yet again, he reveals another one of God's plans to an individual, who I imagine, had completely different plans.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Luke 1** and we will jump down to **verse 26**.

²⁶Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, God took the next step in His plan of redemption and salvation, and He sent the angel Gabriel from heaven, not to Jerusalem, but to the village of **Nazareth** to deliver another birth announcement.

Nazareth was a farming village in the backwoods region of Galilee – well off the beaten path. This village was insignificant to the Jews – nothing good could come from there as far as they were concerned, and yet, according to God's plan, Gabriel was sent specifically to this place to speak to a young **virgin** named **Mary**.

Now, Mary was an ordinary girl, who at this time, was likely a young teenager – somewhere around the age of 14. She's a normal girl, and, just like any normal girl, I imagine Mary probably grew up having the same plans other girls had in that culture – plans of marriage, of having a home, and of a raising family just like her mother did and her grandmother before her – and, Mary was already moving in that direction as she's **engaged** or betrothed to a man named **Joseph** – who's a righteous man – a carpenter, in the family line of King **David**.

Mary is *betrothed*, meaning she's in the second phase of the process leading to her marriage with Joseph. In those days, it was the custom of the parents to find a suitable match for their children, and once a match was made, the couple and their families would take time to become acquainted, and if everything worked out between them, the two families would then enter into a formal contract. A dowry would be negotiated and then the couple would be pledged to each other in a formal ceremony usually in a synagogue. It's at this point they are engaged or betrothed – and it's legally binding.

In essence, they become husband and wife; although, they cannot live together as husband and wife, nor have any sexual relations until the betrothal period is completed on the wedding day – which tended to be one year later.

So, for all practical purposes, Mary seems to have a good plan, a sensible plan, a plan that's already in motion – a plan she could fully expect would come to pass. It seems that Mary has it all figured out, but as I said earlier *“If you want to make God laugh, just tell Him your plans!”*

Well, let's see what happens next as we continue the story with **verse 28**.

And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Mary is apparently alone in her parents' home, and just like Zacharias in the temple – *poof* – the angel Gabriel shows up, and he greets Mary by calling her “**favored one**”. That word “*favored*” implies that Mary has received God’s undeserved grace in a special way. In other words, Mary is not favored by God because of something she has done, or because of where she was from, or because of her age, or because she passed some kind of religious test – rather, God has graciously singled Mary out because He wanted to – His favor rests upon her, and He has chosen her for use in His plan.

Gabriel tells Mary, “**The Lord is with you**” which was often said in the Old Testament to individuals who were called by God for a special task. For example, in **Exodus 3:12**, God told Moses He would be with him when given the mission to bring the people out of Egypt. In **Joshua 1:9**, God told Joshua He was with him before entering into the Promised Land. In **Judges 6:12**, Gideon is told by an angel that the Lord was with him before he was to lead 300 men into battle against an enemy of 135,000 fighting men.

Mary is no different – and neither are we. The words “*the Lord is with you*” are words we need to always remember, especially when God is in the process of changing our plans to His plans.

Well, understandably, this unexpected visit by the angel Gabriel and his choice of words were startling to Mary, and in **verses 29-30**, we read:

²⁹ But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. ³⁰ The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.

So, this young teenage girl isn’t sure what to make of the angel’s words – Mary doesn’t know why she’s being greeted so honorably – Gabriel understands this, and so he repeats his reassuring and comforting words to her. “**Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.**”

And then Gabriel, who’s apparently the angel of birth announcements, shares another one with Mary – and as I read this, pay special attention to the certainty of his words to her. Beginning with **verse 31** Gabriel says:

³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; ³³ and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no

end.”³⁴ Mary said to the angel, “**How can this be, since I am a virgin?**”³⁵ The angel answered and said to her, “**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.**”³⁶ And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month.³⁷ **For nothing will be impossible with God.**”

*“So, Mary, congratulations – you’re going to be a mother. Your baby will be a boy, and you will name him **Jesus**. And oh, and by the way, just so you know – He’s the **Son of God** – the long-awaited Messiah that you and your people have been hoping for. He’s the King, not a king, but the King – the King of Kings who will ultimately rule forever. Oh yea, one more thing, Elizabeth is having a baby too, and she has a six-month head start on you.”*

That’s some birth announcement, and if you notice, the focus of this announcement was not on Mary – it’s on Jesus.

Well, Mary is trying to take all of this in, and no doubt this incredible news is overwhelming for her. Mary believes Gabriel, and she is willing to do her part, but she’s confused, so she asks a question, “**How can this be, since I am a virgin?**”

Now, some have wondered why Zacharias was left mute for nine months when he asked Gabriel for a sign after receiving his birth announcement about John, but Mary receives no consequences for asking her question.

Well, the answer is really simple. Zacharias lacked faith and wanted a sign to determine *if* what Gabriel said was true. Mary, on the other hand, accepted what Gabriel said as being true, but in her confusion, she simply needed clarification as to *how* it would happen. Her question was about the *how*, not about the *if*.

Mary believes, but she’s confused with the biology, and so Gabriel explains by telling her,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”

I read an interesting comment by Warren Wiersbe about this passage. He said the word “**overshadowed**” is applied to the holy and powerful presence of God in the *Holy of Holies* behind the curtain in the Jewish temple, and so by using that word here, in essence, Mary’s womb becomes a *Holy of Holies* of sort for the presence of the Son of God. That’s a gracious honor bestowed upon Mary.

And in regards to the **virgin** birth, I know there are those who doubt it – even some who profess to be Christians are unable to accept the idea of the virgin birth, but, keep in mind that Luke – who is an educated and trained physician, is telling us this, and secondly and more importantly, if you believe the virgin birth is impossible, **then what does that say about your view of God?**

If your God can't do the impossible, then for example, the whole matter of creation becomes a major stumbling block for you. Miracles are no longer miracles – they are just unexplained natural phenomena. Jesus was just a man who died on a cross like many others. There is no resurrection, and God is no longer big enough to save you and to help you.

So, I have no difficulty whatsoever in accepting the virgin birth of Jesus. For God, the impossible is possible and the Bible is very clear that Mary was a virgin who would give birth to **Jesus – the Son of God.**

Now, shifting to the matter of God's plans, when Gabriel makes this birth announcement to Mary, I am sure Mary had a pretty good idea that her life would not continue as she had planned. Her plan – although a good one, was not even remotely close to the plan that God had for her – a plan that would include many difficulties and painful sorrows.

Mary is going to become pregnant, which would be very hard for this virgin girl to explain to others. **Who's going to believe her story?** Put yourself back then and there. **Would you believe it?** Ironically, pregnancy would remove the disgrace that Elizabeth had experienced all of her life, but this pregnancy would bring disgrace upon Mary. Gone was her reputation and with it her plans.

And then she has to wonder what will Joseph think. **What's he going to do? Is he going to blow his top? Is he going to shame her in public?** Mary could have been whipped or even stoned to death for allegedly committing adultery, and by law, Joseph would be permitted to throw the first stone. Now not has harsh, Joseph could have divorced her just as well – and he considered doing that very thing, if it wasn't for an angel who set the record straight in a dream.

We know that King Herod becomes jealous of the reported birth of the Messiah and slaughters all boys two years old and under in an attempt to kill her son Jesus. Joseph and Mary had to flee some 200 miles into Egypt, only to return to Nazareth after Herod had died.

Mary would become a widow. We know this because on the cross, Jesus asked His disciple John to take care of her. We don't know when she became a widow, but the last time we hear about Joseph was when Jesus was 12.

And lastly, Mary was there when Jesus died. Mary watched her son be wrongfully accused, publicly humiliated, literally beaten to a pulp, and horribly crucified. Mary personally witnessed this and could do absolutely nothing to help her boy.

Mary did not know that any of this was in store for her – she was not given the details of God's plan by Gabriel, but she did know she was *avored by God* and the *Lord was with her*.

During the Christmas season, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are reminded that we too are favored by God and the Lord is with us. We know this because God sent His Son into the world and would later pay the ultimate price to prove His love for us. He will not abandon us. We also know that God has His own plans, and sometimes His plans collide with our plans. We are told in **Proverbs 16:9**,

“The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.”

Does this mean we are not supposed to make plans? No. We should make plans, but with that said, we need to be willing to adjust our plans – and if need be, even abandon our plans, as God reveals His own plans for our life.

So, how did Mary respond to the announcement from Gabriel? Look at **verse 38**.

And Mary said, “Behold, the bond slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

After hearing everything the angel had to say, it seems that Mary took a deep breath and said, *“I am the bond slave of the Lord.”*

In using those words **“bond slave”** she was expressing her complete trust and total submission to the will of God. She surrendered the plans that she had for her life, and accepted the plans that God had for her. *“May it be done to me according to Your word O Lord.”* Great words to live by from this teenage girl.

“If you want to make God laugh, just tell Him your plans!” God has this habit of changing our plans to suit His plans, and maybe you have been handed something that you did not expect and did not want. It was not part of your plans – and you are trying to understand it all, but regardless of what you are facing, regardless of what you are experiencing – like Mary, trust that you are favored by God, that He is with you, and determine in your heart that you will seek God's will and trust that He has a much better, more rewarding plan for you.

Source Material:

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