

## Christmas Gifts – Faith – Luke 1

Here it is, the Christmas season and most of us are thinking about gifts. We are thinking about giving gifts, getting gifts, finding the right gift, wrapping gifts, affording gifts. But this morning, somebody tell me about the best gift you have even given or received.

Have you ever gotten a gift you didn't really want? Maybe you didn't know what to do with it or how to work it. Maybe it didn't fit or you just didn't like it for whatever reason. I'm horrible at buying gifts. I don't like doing it. I don't know where to go. I don't even want to receive any kind of gift. It's just not my love language. And that makes Christmas difficult sometimes.

But giving gifts is God's love language. And He's good at it, right? And if He wants to give me something, I'm all for it. The problem is, sometimes His gifts can be subtle. Sometimes they are hard to see. It might be in plain sight and yet hard to see that this is a gift from God. **James 1** says, *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."* And so we know that God's gifts are perfect for us but sometimes we don't realize what we have when He gives it.

I doubt that even Mary knew what all she was being given to her when the angel Gabriel came and told her she was going to have a baby. Let's turn to the **Gospel of Luke, chapter 1**, and let's read that story again and I want you to be watching for the gifts that God gives Mary. There's more to it than just a baby obviously. I mean she was going to be the mother of the Messiah. That had to be mind-blowing. She was a virgin and so how this was going to happen was mind-blowing. Then there was the mind-blowing visit from the angel. I can't imagine that and I can't imagine how this young girl was able to believe all of this was going to happen to her...except through faith. Let's read **Luke chapter 1, verses 26-38**.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." <sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail." <sup>38</sup> **"I am the Lord's servant,"** Mary answered. **"May your word to me be fulfilled."** Then the angel left her.

This is a fascinating passage to me. It's fascinating because if you read the passage just before this, you see this same angel, Gabriel, going to Zechariah and telling him basically the same message. In **verse 13** he tells Zechariah, *"Greetings Zech! Your wife is going to have a baby."* And what does Zechariah say? *"How can this be? My wife and I are old."*

Now, you have to get the picture. When we think of angels, we think of halos and wings and little golden diapers on precious little cherubim that flit and flutter. I don't know where that comes from. A better picture would be a giant Navy SEAL dressed for battle. See, Gabriel was a warrior. His job was to fight demons day in and day out. And one day God says, *"I have an easy job for you today, Gabe. Go tell Zechariah his wife is gonna get pregnant."*

No problem. Gabriel goes down and tells Zechariah and Zechariah has the nerve to question Gabriel like he's not sure Gabriel is telling the truth. And in my mind – this is not biblical – but in my mind, I picture Gabriel bowing up to this little old man and getting right up in his shriveled up old face and he says, *"I am Gabriel. I stand before God every day. Every day I stand in the presence of the Creator, Redeemer, Deliverer and Sustainer. Who are you to question me? But because you have questioned me, you will not speak for the next nine months."*

Now, fast forward a few months and God tells Gabriel to go tell Mary she was going to be pregnant and so he does. And Mary says basically the same thing that Zechariah said. *"How will this be?"* She said, *"How will this happen since I am a virgin?"* And you might expect Gabriel to bow up again and make Mary mute or something. But Gabriel patiently and calmly explains things. So, what's the difference?

The difference is faith. Mary wasn't asking because she didn't believe. She was just asking because she was ignorant of how this was going to play out. That's understandable. Gabriel understood that. And so he explained it. Mary had faith that what Gabriel said was

going to happen. She was just curious about the details. Zechariah didn't have the faith. He was doubting and so Gabriel punished him.

**Hebrews 11:6** says it's impossible to please God without faith. Faith is a gift that God gives to everybody. Did you know that? We are told in **Romans 12:3** that God gives everybody a "measure of faith." Now, for some people that measure is a little more and some may be given a little less but we are all given some faith. What you choose to do with that faith is up to you.

Again, comparing Zechariah and Mary, you would think that Zechariah would be a great man of faith. We are told in **verse 7** that he and his wife were well along in years and usually with age comes faith. He was also a priest. In fact, he was the priest chosen to go into the temple and burn incense which was a big deal for a priest. So, he must have been doing that job for a long time and was well respected. And yet he didn't have faith.

Then Mary was just a youngster, probably a teenager and yet she showed great faith. We don't know anything about Mary before this so we don't know her upbringing or what may have allowed her faith to grow but there it is on full display in one of the most beautiful and poignant verses in all scripture, **verse 38** where she says, "I am the Lord's servant, May your word to me be fulfilled." That is a beautiful picture of faith. Do you think Mary had a few more questions? Sure she did. But what Gabriel said to her was enough and she believed. And because she believed, her life was changed.

**Augustine** once said, "*Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest understand.*" But I hear ya. Some of you out there may be thinking this whole faith thing sounds like a lot of work and you aren't really sure if you need it and you probably have enough without trying to get more. And I understand that thinking. I do. You may be wondering what's in it for you. Can't please God without faith but what good does it really do a person. Well, let me give you some reasons why you want to have faith like Mary.

First and foremost, faith is life-changing but, again, I understand some of you may not want your life changed. You are content where you are spiritually. I think that's immature but let's talk about it. Now, I am making a big assumption here that all of us in this room have believed in Jesus to be our Lord and Savior. We have shown saving faith. That's not the kind of faith I'm talking about. This is a deeper level of faith that grows after we become true followers of Jesus.

Using the faith you have is like working a muscle. The more you do it, the bigger it gets. And strong muscles help you get through hard times. Strong muscles protect you from injury. So, let me ask you a question. Has anybody here ever gone through a difficult time in their life? Dumb question, right? Of course you have. There's a good chance you're going through one right now.

Do you know how you get through those hard times without winding up completely wrecked, sucking your thumb in the fetal position? It takes faith. Do you know what **Ephesians 6** says we should do when Satan and his demons are shooting flaming arrows at us? We take up the shield of faith. Faith helps us, protects us, keeps us from crashing and burning like Satan wants us to.

What if Mary didn't have faith enough to believe Gabriel? What if she got pregnant out of the blue and couldn't explain to Joseph or anybody else what happened? She would have crashed and burned and been a total mess. She'd still make it to Heaven if she had saving faith but her mental and physical health depended on her faith. It depended on her belief that what Gabriel said was true because he was sent by God. And because she had faith, she had peace.

How's that for another reason to have faith? Do you want peace? It takes faith. **Romans 5:1** states, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* We can have peace with God! That's a big deal. But we can also have peace with each other people through our faith. **Ephesians 2** is talking about the barrier that had always been between Jews and Gentiles and Paul said in **verse 14**, *"For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has torn down the dividing wall of hostility."* We can have peace with each other but you have to have faith to have that kind of peace.

I think of Paul and Silas in jail in **Acts 16** where they have been beaten and put in stocks and basically horribly abused and what are they doing? They are praying and singing hymns to God. Where does that kind of peace come from? It comes from having faith.

Let me tell you another way faith helps you. Faith helps you be obedient to God. Now, you say, Todd, how does being obedient help me personally? I understand that's what God wants but what does that really do for me? Well, that's a good question and the answer is that obedience is directly tied to joy.

I remember some years ago I decided I was going to study how to have joy. I started by looking at all the people in scripture who were said to have joy. What were they doing to have joy? What was the common denominator of those people that brought them joy? Do you know what the answer was? I found that all those people had joy in the context of being obedient. And what helps you be obedient more than having faith?

If you know that God loves you and He is in control, then you can be obedient to whatever He tells you to do. When you have seen in the past that God is going to protect you and provide for you, then your faith is strengthened. It's like lifting weights for your faith muscles. What's really cool is that unlike lifting weights physically, you can watch somebody else have faith and your faith is strengthened. If you go to the gym and watch other people lift, you don't get bigger muscles. But when you watch somebody else go through some difficulty and God provides and protects them, your faith gets bigger.

Now, that brings up the occasions for building our faith. Most of the time the occasions that build our faith are not the easy, fun, happy mountain top situations. Most of the faith-building situations we are going to encounter are going to involve you saying something like, *"Well, this isn't fair! This isn't right! What did I do to deserve this?"*

Think about **Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego**. What faith-building situation are they most known for? In **Daniel chapter 3** they are about to be thrown into a fiery furnace. Do you think at some point at least one of them thought, *"Well, this isn't fair! This isn't right! What did I do to deserve this?"* Yeah, probably.

Let me ask you a question. If you were about to be thrown to your death in a super-hot blazing furnace, what would your last words be? You don't know, do you? We would all like to think it would be something brave and God-honoring but we don't know because we have never been there. It's not until you have been in the furnace that you know how strong your faith is. It took the threat of death for the faith of those three Hebrew boys to lead them to say, *"We know God can save us and we know He will but even if He doesn't still we will worship Him."* That's what faith looks like. That's what peace and even joy looks like when there is no peace and joy to be found. That's what obedience looks like and that's where the blessings of God are found.

**Oswald Chambers** said, *"Faith for my deliverance is not faith in God. Faith means, whether I am visibly delivered or not, I will stick to my belief that God is love. There are some things only learned in a fiery furnace."* (Run Today's Race)

I said earlier that most of the occasions that build our faith are in difficulties but not all of them. Go back to young Mary in our passage here this morning. The angel came to give her good news. It's just hard to believe news. But it is still an opportunity for Mary to show her faith. So, the takeaway here is that whatever God allows you to go through, we need to keep an eye out for the opportunity to prove our faith and we prove our faith by our works. **James 2:17** states, *"So too, faith by itself, if it does not result in action, is dead."*

So, what kind of actions show our faith? In **John 14:15**, Jesus declares, *"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."* First off, you will be obedient to God. That shows your faith. Another hallmark of true faith is love for others. The Apostle Paul, in **Galatians 5:6**, writes, *"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. All that matters is faith, expressed through love."* So, faith leads to love.

True faith is also evidenced by perseverance through trials and tribulations. The Apostle Peter encourages believers in **1 Peter 1:6-7**: *"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in various trials, so that the proven character of your faith—more precious than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* Trials serve to refine and prove the authenticity of one's faith.

Can you see the cycle in all this? We know we are going to go through trials and problems. Everybody does. But sometimes God allows us to go through something and we show that we have faith. We don't freak out. We don't quit church. We believe that, based on previous history, God is going to protect and provide for us. And so we are calm even in the storm. We are obedient. We give God glory in our words and actions. And what happens? God gives us peace and joy and blessings. And our faith is increased. Then God allows us to go through something else. And because we saw last time that God protected and provided, we have faith to be obedient again and it starts all over with faith and blessings and peace and joy and pretty soon you start to live out what **John 10:10** says that God wants for us and that is a full and abundant life.

Do you think Mary had a full and abundant life? Oh my, did she! She had faith. She had blessings. She had peace and joy. She was obedient. She had it going on. And that is what God wants for you. You will never go through what Mary went through but you will have plenty of opportunities to flex your faith and allow God to use you. Look one more time at this beautiful passage. Look at the very last couple of sentences spoken by Little Miss

Faiths A Lot, Mary. **“I am the Lord’s servant,”** Mary answered. **“May your word to me be fulfilled.”**

**\*Music\***

Let’s let those words be our words. I am your servant, Lord. Whatever you want from me, you can have. Whatever you want to give me, I’ll take. Whatever you want to take away, I give with open hands. I trust you, Lord. My faith, my belief, my hope and my security is in you and you only. Have your way in my life, Jesus. I trust you.

Can you say that? If not, maybe you don’t have a relationship with God through His Son Jesus. Maybe today you need to ask Him into your life by faith and ask Him to forgive you of your sins and to change you to be more like Him. Do that right now as the music plays.