“I AM THE LORD’S SERVANT”

Luke 1:26–56

Key Verse: 1:38

“‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her.”

“Would you do me a favor?” It’s a common question. But there’s also the common saying: “Don’t do me any favors!” It can be humiliating to accept a favor, and we always feel we have to pay it back. We know about human favors, but there’s also God’s favor. What is it? God’s favor is a very special privilege, but it’s also available to the most humble, ordinary person. In the first part of chapter 1 an angel announces the birth of John the Baptist to his father, Zechariah. Now he announces the birth of Jesus to his mother, Mary. Unlike Zechariah, Mary has been the subject of so many books, music and art. Mary’s story has struck a chord in human beings all around the world. It’s so relatable because it’s the painful story of a mother and her son. But in the midst of that painful story God was doing something wonderful. Today’s passage has three parts: the angel’s message to Mary; Mary visits Elizabeth; and Mary’s Song. In these three parts we can see how Mary changes, from troubled, to desperate, to praising God. What was it that changed her? The key of it all was her decision to accept God’s favor. In this study we want to think about the meaning of God’s favor, how we can accept it and go through with it, and what happens to us when we do. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 26. Here we see the time setting and location of the story. It was in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. God was already doing something miraculous. God was sending the one who would go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. Now the story turns to a different place: It was Nazareth, a town in Galilee. Nazareth was a humble, country town. It was probably the last place anyone would expect God to do something great. But God sent the angel Gabriel there, because the time had come for God to finally send the promised Messiah.

But who would be his mother? Look at verse 27. Here Luke introduces us to Mary. In Luke’s Gospel, women play an important role, and perhaps the most important woman of all is Mary. How is she described? She’s simply called “a virgin.” And it says she was “pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.” In Judaism, “virgins” were young maidens, fourteen years old or younger. It also meant she’d never been with a man. She was pure. But at 14 Mary was already engaged. It was a common thing in that society. Mary was fortunate enough to be engaged to a man named Joseph. The Bible tells us he was a carpenter. He was hardworking and could support a family. But it also says here that he was born in the royal line of David. Joseph may have inherited the character of David, who was known as a man after God’s own heart. Mary was going to get to marry this wonderful young man, Joseph. As a young teenaged girl we can just imagine how happy she was, with all the dreams that young women can have. It’s likely she was already preparing for the happy day, making her own wedding dress and other precious things for her new life with Joseph.

At this moment in her life, what happened? Let’s read verse 28. The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, of all people! And he told her she was “highly favored” and that the Lord was with her! It seemed such an odd greeting to a humble, country teenaged girl about to get married. Socially, she had no status at all; she was a nobody. How did she respond? Look at verse 29. It says she was “greatly troubled.” The Greek word literally means she was confused or perplexed. The Message Bible translates it as “thoroughly shaken.” Basically, she was freaking out. Why? It wasn’t just because an angel was in front of her. To young Mary, it just wasn’t the right time. She was getting ready to be married! And what kind of greeting was this, anyway? It says she “wondered.” In Greek it literally says she began having a serious internal conversation with herself. She sensed God wasn’t just blessing her before her marriage. It seemed God was planning something else. That’s what was troubling her heart. It’s really hard to interrupt a young woman who has her heart set on getting ready for her wedding.

What happened next? Let’s read verse 30. The angel reassured Mary that she had nothing to be afraid of. He said she had found favor with God. What does that mean? In Greek the word “favor” is “charis,” which can be translated as “gift” or “grace.” But Mary wasn’t finding a favor from God, but favor “with” God. It meant God saw her and was especially pleased with her. It also meant that out of all the women he could have chosen, God chose her. God’s favor is his grace to choose us for his greater purpose. To be chosen by God for his use is never scary or burdensome; it’s always a most beautiful thing.

The angel went on to tell her about God’s specific favor in her life. Let’s read verses 31–33. There are a number of details here. Mary was going to have a son named Jesus. He would be “great.” He would be called “the Son of the Most High.” God would give him the throne of his father David. He would reign over Jacob’s descendants forever. His kingdom would never end. These were promises God had made to his servant David. This descendant of David was the one God’s people had been longing and hoping for the past 1,000 years. Put together, it was all pretty incredible. Many women think their son is the best. But it was God’s angel telling Mary all these things about her son. It was the greatest blessing a woman could ever have, to be the mother of Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the eternal King, the Son of God.

What did Mary say to this? Look at verse 34. She asked, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Mary wasn’t married yet, and though she was just a young teenager, she knew she couldn’t have a baby without a husband. Maybe she was hoping the angel would tell her the baby would come after she’d been with Joseph. But it was not to be. Let’s read verse 35. Jesus would be conceived not by a man, but by the Holy Spirit, and be born of a virgin, Mary. He would be holy, without sin, and he’d be called, in the most unique way, “the Son of God.”

The angel didn’t explain why Jesus had to be conceived in this way. But Hebrews tells us that Jesus had to be sinless so that he could be our Great High Priest who would offer himself once and for all for the sins of the world. Hebrews 7:26 says, “Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.” On the other hand, Hebrews 4:15 says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” And Hebrews 2:17,18 says, “For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” Born of Mary, Jesus was fully human. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was fully God.

The angel went on to encourage Mary further. Let’s read verses 36,37. In other words, God can do it. God can help an old woman to become pregnant. God can cause a virgin to conceive without a man. It’s because the Almighty Creator God can do the impossible. God still loves to work in impossible ways, through our greatest weaknesses, if only we believe him. He wants us to have this kind of faith in him.

How did Mary respond? Let’s read verse 38. She agreed to do it! It sounds so simple, but really it was very hard. How would Mary explain her pregnancy before marriage to her family? How would she explain it to her fiancé Joseph? She could most likely lose him. In fact, in their society women could be stoned for such things. She would have to bear the shame of being an unwed mother. But Mary was willing to go through all this. She was willing to risk everything for it, not because she was being dumb, but because she was convinced it was God’s will for her. She may have seemed like just a young teenager, but she had courage. She called herself “the Lord’s servant.” She had a clear sense of who she was in God. She was ready to serve God, ready to obey him, ready to sacrifice herself for him, because she loved him. Mary’s obedience to God made her a truly beautiful woman. They say that one decision of faith is worth more than 10,000 theological arguments. Mary’s clear decision shows us how to respond to God’s favor. We need to respond to God’s favor with faith, faith that’s ready to obey him, no matter what the personal cost.

Look at verse 39. Mary suddenly hurried from Nazareth to a town in the hill country of Judea. That town was about 90 miles away, and young Mary had to go on foot, so it would take her three to four days to get there. Why was she suddenly going all that way, and why so hurriedly? Look at verse 40. Mary remembered that the angel had told her about her relative Elizabeth. Mary had made a great decision, but like all great decisions, it becomes so hard afterwards to actually follow through. Who could Mary talk to? Who would understand her? But Mary believed that because God was doing something unusual in her old relative Elizabeth, she would understand her.

What happened when Mary greeted Elizabeth? Look at verse 41. Elizabeth’s baby John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit and leaped in her womb. Though Elizabeth was so old, she too was filled with the Holy Spirit. She could give wise counsel to Mary not because she was old, but because she was filled with the Spirit. What happened? Let’s read verses 42,43. The only way Elizabeth could know that Mary was going to have a baby and who her baby would be was through the Holy Spirit in her. At this moment in her life Mary probably didn’t feel blessed. Humanly speaking, the cold realities of becoming an unwed mother were engulfing her, as well as worries about what kind of life her child would face. But Elizabeth told her, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” Mary really needed to hear these words of confirmation of God’s blessing. Mary could have felt so down about herself, wondering what she had done to her life. Yet Elizabeth said, “But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Elizabeth didn’t look down on her; even though she was so much older, she genuinely respected Mary as “the mother of my Lord.” These words didn’t take away the difficulties in her life, but they confirmed to Mary that what the angel had told her was really true. Look at verse 44. Elizabeth’s baby leaped for joy because he knew that Mary would bear the Messiah Jesus. Let’s read verse 45. Elizabeth affirmed Mary’s faith in God’s promises to her. In fact, every woman who really believes God’s promises to her will be blessed, no matter what she may have to go through. These verses show us the best way to counsel and encourage people. Instead of giving human sympathy or human advice, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We need to help people see God’s blessings in their lives. And we need to help people believe God’s promises are true.

The last part of today’s passage is called “Mary’s Song.” Just like Hannah in the Old Testament sang a song when she heard God was giving her a son, Samuel, so Mary sang a song of praise to God. How did it begin? Let’s read verses 46,47. Mary was no longer troubled or desperate; she was full of praise to God. It wasn’t a superficial song; it came from her soul and spirit. When she accepted God’s words through the angel and acted on them, Mary suddenly became more aware of God and how great he is, and it made her so joyful—way more than when she was just thinking about marrying Joseph.

Why was Mary so joyful? Let’s read verses 48,49. Mary experienced God’s favor in a very personal way. She knew she was nothing but a humble person, but she realized that God is Mighty, God is holy, and this great God was doing great things for her by using her as the mother of his Son. All generations really have called her blessed. But it wasn’t just all about her. Mary learned through her own experience how God always works. Let’s read verse 50. When we really fear God, he shows us his mercy.

Mary went on to praise God for how he deals with people. Let’s read verses 51–53. What God does is opposite to how the world works. In this fallen world, proud people, rulers, and rich people seem invincible and they dominate, whereas humble and poor people are oppressed and seem like nobodies. But God loves to humble the proud and exalt the humble. God loves to bless those who are humble enough to put their trust in him, not in themselves. Mary saw great spiritual meaning in having her baby. Let’s read verses 54,55. The birth of Jesus was God’s faithfulness to his promises to Abraham and all his descendants. Like Mary, we need to see the meaning of what God is doing and praise him for his faithfulness. Verse 56 says Mary stayed with Elizabeth for the next three months, until right before she gave birth to John. She must have found great spiritual refuge being with her, and the strength to go home and face all the challenges with faith in God.

Let’s read verse 38 again. Through this decision Mary accepted God’s costly favor in her life. And through Elizabeth’s spiritual help she changed from feeling desperate to being filled with praise to God. May God help us to accept his favor and open our eyes to see the great things he wants to do in and through us.