

The Joy of Belief-

Last week we talked about one man's foolish refusal to ask God for a sign in Isaiah chapter seven... King Ahaz... This week we are looking at a woman who didn't need one...Who didn't ask for one, who believed without doubt, yet God still blessed her with a sign to confirm his promise and choice concerning her. That woman is a descendant of Ahaz, who, despite his lack of faith was the ancestor of a very faithful woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus. You probably remember the story... Mary, a virgin, was engaged to Joseph. When Gabriel came to Mary in the preceding passage and told her that she would bear a child, he said “

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 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever: and his kingdom will have no end.”

Understandably, her response was “how can this be since I am a virgin?”, it seems like she kind of skips over at first the whole “being great” part and goes back to “I'm having a what!!!!?”

Gabriel responds by giving her a sign, in a sense saying, “I know you're a virgin...but you remember your cousin Elizabeth don't you, she's been trying to have a child for 30 or 40 years and has been barren that entire time. God has willed that she will have a child, indeed she's already six months along...so believe what I am telling you. If God can open her womb, he can do anything,

Gabriel says...nothing is impossible with God... an echo of the words God spoke to Sarah way back in Genesis...

Now, if you remember, the other few times that God pulled this opening the womb of a barren woman in scripture, you know that people like Isaac, Jacob, Samuel were the result of God's actions...some pretty heavy hitters in the Old Testament.

So, just like we would in similar circumstances...Mary takes off to Elizabeth's house as fast as she can. She had been told she would have a sign so she was gonna go have a look. It was about a 70 mile trip from Mary's house to Elizabeth's house, it would've taken about 3 or 4 days to complete the trip on foot. So we're not talking about running down the street here or a couple of blocks. Mary ran into the house and greeted Elizabeth. The presence of Christ even in the womb was enough inspiration for the unborn John the Baptist to begin his ministry of proclaiming and preparing the way of Jesus Christ. This fulfills the prophecy that Luke recorded in chapter 1 verse 15 where it says that "he will be filled with the Spirit while yet in his mother's womb." He leaped in her womb and when Elizabeth felt the movement, at the same time she was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Prior to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to indwell every believer, believers were filled with the Holy Spirit for specific tasks. Elizabeth's task for which she had been filled with the Holy Spirit, was to confirm to Mary that what Gabriel had promised was true. She had not been told beforehand that Mary was pregnant, or that the baby she carried was the Messiah. The reason that Elizabeth considered Mary blessed is two fold. First she is blessed because she would give birth to the Messiah. Second, she is blessed because she *believed* the promise of God. Mary believed that what God had promised, he would fulfill. Her seeking out this sign that she was promised was an indication of her belief. This is very different from the sign that was given to Zechariah, earlier in this chapter. He laughed at the promise of God...and the sign that was given

him...being struck dumb...was intended both as proof of the truthfulness of the promise as well as judgment of his disbelief. Because Mary had believed God without requiring a sign, God blessed her with the encouragement of the prophecy of Elizabeth

Mary responds to Elizabeth's prophecy with what we know as the Magnificat. It is a song of praise to God. It is an expression of Mary's belief that God is faithful and would fulfill all that he had promised because he had fulfilled what he had promised to her. Praise is an outpouring of the Joy of Christ's presence. The Magnificat's main purpose was to glorify God and thank him for his blessing. The song here is essentially broken up into three parts:

- 1) What God had done for Mary
- 2) What God had done for all of God's People
- 3) And What God had done for Israel

Mary called God "my savior." Mary understood the role that the Messiah would play in her deliverance and that of her people. While He had specifically chosen Mary for exaltation, God still had to save Mary. Mary was a sinner like you and me and trusted God for salvation.

Her wonder is inspired in much the same way that we wonder at our own salvation. She is not lifting herself above others, but recognizing her own unworthiness for salvation. It is because she is unworthy that her joy is even more increased when God chose to bless her.

God "had regard" for Mary. He had chosen her out of many and looked with favor on her so that people throughout history would look back on her and recognize God's blessing on her.

God, the Mighty One, had done great things for Mary. God not only had regard for her, but worked on her behalf because she yielded to and believed God's will for her.

That is what God had done for Mary...but she also realized that the blessing that was given to her was to be a blessing to all of mankind. What he did for us was to show us mercy. We are

those who fear him. Fearing God means to believe him, to respect his will. It means to believe that God will punish when he says he will punish. It means to believe that God will have mercy on those who trust in him. He has done mighty deeds to help the helpless, to lift up the humble, and to fill the hungry.

Now, when it says that God has lifted up the humble, it's not precisely what it sounds like...the opposite of humility is pride, right? So if God is exalting the humble, is he making them prideful? The humble Mary refers to are those who have a low station in life. They are not the ones who exhibit some intangible personality characteristic, but those *who have been humbled*. They are the poor, the powerless, the weak...God has gifted the poor, empowered the powerless, and strengthened the weak. He has delivered them from oppression, and given them hope because of their belief.

None of us here look like we are all that hungry, although Fred might argue with that statement a little bit...

But this reference is to God meeting the needs of his people. Not many of us experience true hunger, but we have needs, and God has promised that he will meet them and remove any obstacle to his provision. Those who trust in him will have their needs met. If we fear God, then we will trust him.

Notice that he has sent the rich away empty. Those who come to God as if they have all the answers, with no recognition of their needs before him, have no trust in him. If they do not believe that they have any needs, then they cannot rely on God to meet them. These are the same people who are mentioned in verse 51 as those who are proud in the thoughts of their heart. In their own minds, they've got it all together and have no need for God...they've got no need for his help.

Mary's understanding is that God has acted in this way throughout history, acting on the behalf of those who fear him.

But even more, Mary sees the fulfillment of the promise of the Messiah as an indication that the completion of this deliverance is future. Mary's praise does not focus on the immediate blessing of the birth of this child, but on the ultimate outcome of the coming of the Messiah.

We have seen what God had done for Mary and what God has done for us...this passage also mentions a promise to Israel. Beginning in verse 54, Mary begins glorifying God because of the fulfillment of his promise of a Messiah in the child to which she would give birth. She refers to it as God remembering his mercy, as God giving help to Israel as he had promised. God has given help to his people...in remembrance of his mercy. It means here that he's got a reputation to maintain and a record to uphold. The Messiah would offer hope forever to those who believed in the same way hope had been offered to Abraham through the promise of his coming. We may have joy in the knowledge that God remembers his promises and is faithful to fulfill them.

Focus on the reason for Mary's song here...she had believed God and her belief had brought her joy. Without seeing proof, she considered God's promise alone to be worthy of belief.

Mary believed the promise that God had given to the nation of Israel that he would provide a Messiah. She believed the promise that she had been given by God that she would give birth to this Messiah. She was blessed because she believed.

In the celebration of Christmas, we remember the promise that was given to Mary, the promise of the birth of the Messiah. This Messiah was born, died, and was resurrected.

Our promise is that we will be resurrected with him. Because that same Messiah died and was resurrected on the third day, we will have life. We have hope and joy in that promise of life.

Someone once said of faith “Sight is not faith, and hearing is not faith, neither is feeling faith; but believing when we neither see, hear, nor feel is faith; everywhere the Bible tells us our salvation is to be by our faith. Therefore, we must believe before we feel, and often against our feelings, if we would honor God by our faith.

Mary was given a promise, which, in its fulfillment, would cause her to feel shame and embarrassment in front of those around her. Not only was she pregnant outside of wedlock, but her son would die the death of a criminal. Her focus was not on the present, but on what the benefit of her blessing would be for her and for generations to come. Mary was not concerned with the problems that the promise of the Messiah caused for her, only the blessing and the joy that was inherent in it. Her faith was her joy. Belief and trust in God was her joy.

Mary's example teaches us something that is, frankly, somewhat disconcerting to me. That is that in the giving of his blessings, God is not so concerned with “what we receive”, but far more concerned with “what we become” by his blessing. The greatest blessing that any woman could receive was give to Mary, but in the receiving of it, she would become the object of ridicule and scorn, she would bring, on the short term at least, great shame to her family. The blessing was not in what she received so much as it was in what she would become. In verse 48, we see that Mary was looking at future generations and their opinion of her. In her present day, in the short term, what Mary received was disdain from her community, but what she became was the “most blessed among women.”

The difference in perspective was that Mary was able to recognize God's blessing when it came, regardless of how it appeared on the surface. She valued it, not because of what she would

receive, but for what she would become. She was able to recognize that blessing because she was steeped in the history of God's working within the nation of Israel, she expected God's blessings to come in certain ways. The song that we read in verses 46 through 57 is filled with at least 12 direct scriptural allusions from the Old Testament. In its form, it echoes the song of Hannah in the book of 1 Samuel. She knew what God had done and so she knew, at least to some degree what to expect.

From Mary's example we see that recognizing God's blessings in our lives brings joy and that joy leads to expectation of further blessing. The difficulty for us is often that we fail to recognize God's blessing in our lives, because we fail to understand the way blessing often works. Remember, God is more concerned with what we will become by his blessing, rather than what we will receive. Recognizing God's blessing then, requires at times that we change our criteria for recognizing that blessing. We have to conform our perspective on blessing to God's perspective. When we realize that God's blessing is primarily about our transformation rather than bestowal, we realize greater joy in our lives.

This is not to say that God doesn't often give us gifts that are designed to bring us happiness in and of themselves. And we are used to the idea that God disciplines his children for wrongdoing, thus transforming them through discipline. We can understand that clearly, and we should always be introspective about our own sin. However, the point here is different at its core than either one of these two ideas. The lesson we learn from this passage is that, apart from giving us immediate happiness and separate from discipline for wrongdoing, God may give us blessing in our lives through means that, at the outset, appear to be other than blessing. The circumstances surrounding that blessing may be some of the most challenging you will experience. God's blessing is often more about transformation than bestowal. God's focus is on

making us into something that resembles the image of his Son and he is way more interested in that pursuit than he is in immediate material blessing.

One slightly humorous example of this is God's blessing upon me in the area of mechanics. I don't mean by this automotive mechanics specifically, but of mechanical things in general. I can grasp the concepts of machines and their operation fairly quickly, and apply them to other situations pretty regularly. Now, about the automotive mechanics...let me be open here...I hate cars. I despise their necessity, I despise working on them particularly. I don't know exactly what it is, because there are many machines and other structures that I enjoy working on...but any car of any type is not one of them. But, regardless of my own desires, I understand them relatively well and can work on most things with a reasonable expectation of success. While God has not blessed me with two new cars in the driveway, he has blessed me with the ability to keep the ones I do have going most of the time. Quite honestly, and my wife will confirm this, there have been many times in my life where I have prayed to God to remove this blessing, at least as it pertains to cars, from me. Whenever I pop that hood on any of my vehicles, I wish that I could experience the bliss that is ignorance... I hate cars.

But truth be told, that knowledge and blessing has transformed me. It's not something that I enjoy particularly, but most of the time, when it is needed there's no other way of getting the job done. That blessing has the power to transform a situation. It goes from an impossible one...commuting as much as 25 miles one way to work, not really doable on foot...to a possible one.

You can be that there were times that Mary, in the face of the criticism and tongue wagging of her community, wondered about the wisdom of the blessing she had received. It was inconvenient to say the least... embarrassing and laden with scorn at the worst.

There are these things in our live as well. You can probably make your own list if you wanted to.

Our culture often tells us that children are a burden. They take a lot of work, for a long time throughout your life. They are often inconvenient, sometimes embarrassing, and sometimes bring scorn and disdain on their parents from other people. But as much as we mold and shape and influence them in their lives as they grow and mature...Children transform us as well don't they? Despite the happiness that they bring, or the sadness they can bring, and they bring both God uses them to shape us and us to shape them according to his purpose.

Humble means, especially in the United States, are not something that we normally think of as an element of our lives that is designed as a blessing. In fact, often it is seen as a huge lack in our lives, something which couldn't possibly be a blessing in and of itself. But what is God doing through that to transform us???

Proverbs 30:8-9 says “Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you and say “ Who is the Lord?” Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of my God.”

It may be that God is blessing you with the ability to grow in faith and dependence on him through provision on his schedule and not yours.

Persecution, not a fun thing to go through. In James 1:2-4, another familiar passage...Paul tells us to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials and that the testing of our faith produces exactly what God intends, that is our completion and perfection as sons.

Many things fall into this category, relationships with other people, relationships with believers in particular. Employment in a vocation that you do not feel called to or fulfilled in, but

for the most part meets your needs for the time. Change is often this way in any form, far from just being inconvenient, it often provokes anger and resentment outright.

So how is it that we can recognize God's blessing in our lives when we don't necessarily feel “blessed” right then? Mary did it in three ways, she remembered what God had done for her. She remembered what God had done for all people and she remembered what God had done for Israel. She evidently meditated on the scriptural foundation of her faith regularly and the records of God's saving grace throughout the Old Testament from, as it says in her song “**To Abraham and his offspring forever.**” She remembered what he had done in the past, and remembered what he promised to do in the future. And that remembrance on her part led to further expectation of God's blessing.

It's a whole lot easier to recognize something when you are expecting it, isn't it? We have that same opportunity. We have the whole of the record of God's faithfulness to his people that Mary had, plus a whole lot more. At this time of Advent when we both remember the first advent of Christ and expect his second advent, we should also expect his blessing We should expect to be conformed to his image in our lives. We must keep Christ and his promise of life before us, so that we can have Joy as the result. Recognizing God's blessings in every circumstance even the challenging ones, leads us to realize continued joy in our lives. Remembering that God is the Creator and Giver of good things.

Prayer...

Speaking of expecting a blessing... This is the Sunday in which we normally observe Communion...a time where we remember what Christ accomplished by his coming to earth as a baby who grew into a man, and gave himself as a perfect, sinless, sacrifice out of his love for each one of us.

It was to be sure, a blessing that was attached to some startling specifics, that God would give his only Son, his only begotten Son for a Creation of His that had rejected Him...That he would demonstrate his love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, Romans 5:8.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 (NASB95)

16 Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?

17 Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

There's an assumption made about those who partake of these elements...that by sharing in the cup and the bread that it is an indication of a shared identity in Jesus Christ... he clarified it for us in Verse 17... **Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body**... it is not that taking of this physical matzoh bread that is sitting here in this dish makes us into one body... but that by taking this bread and drinking from this cup, that we are saying something about ourselves that is only true by faith in Jesus Christ... If you haven't trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins and to receive eternal life, we ask that you don't partake of these elements this morning.

Because we love you at El Paso Bible Church, and because we can think of nothing else more loving to do, I want to take a couple of minutes and explain what it means to trust in Christ.

Romans 3:23 (NASB95)

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

This verse says that we are all in need of Savior, to have eternal life, we must attain to the Glory that God created and intended for all of us, but we cannot do that our own...

Romans 6:23 (NASB95)
23 For the wages of sin is death,

Death cannot coexist with Life, that's just a fact. But this verse tells us that what we earned by our sin is death, since we have all sinned, we have all earned death...

that verse goes on, though with some pretty good news...

Romans 6:23 (NASB95)
23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul tells us here, that somehow Jesus Christ offers us eternal life as a free gift...all who have sinned, all who have earned death are all offered eternal life...

How?

I mentioned it earlier, Romans 5:8...

Romans 5:8 (NASB95)
8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

He didn't wait for us to get our act together, he didn't wait for us to meet him in the middle...

Christ died for us while we were still in sin...because he loves you, and he loves me, because he had a great love for every person who has ever been born, and who will ever be born....Christ died for us.

It was all done **for** us, we can't add anything to that life that he gives us... we can't get anymore than he offers us...he asks one thing of us in order to get eternal life, a gift that he extends to each of us...and is to take that gift...a free gift, that cost Jesus Christ his life to give...

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NASB95)

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;

9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

It's by faith, that we take the gift, believing that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and rose from the dead... You don't have to remember the Scripture verses that I have cited...this is not about a force of will, or commitment on your part... it's about belief, it's about trust...both words used as synonyms in the New Testament. Some will tell you that to place your trust in Jesus Christ, you have to commit your life to obedience to Him... But Jesus used a picture to describe this process, he called it being born again...when he was talking to Nicodemus. I have five kids, if you don't know that already....and I'll tell you, I didn't ask a single one of them for a commitment or contract to obey before they could be born...I wouldn't have wanted to do that, God doesn't either, he loves you and wants to give you life freely, as a gift. **Believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead..and you are saved from your sins, you have eternal life... life as God intended for us...life lived forever with eternal quality... God's kind of life lived in us.**

If you believed that this morning for the first time, we would consider it a blessing to us for you to take Communion with us.

I want to take a moment now, and give us all a minute or two to go before the Lord in prayer and make every effort to confess our sins in trust and reliance upon him to forgive us...Scripture tells us that as much as we are able, to come to this Table having confessed our sins, knowing that Jesus is faithful to forgive them...

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