

Favor for a Lifetime



Gary Wilkerson April 30, 2012

How different would your life be if you were walking in divine favor? Does God give favor, bless abundantly and lavish his grace on hungry, awaiting hearts? The answer is yes — and we find this illustrated in Luke 1, the story of Christ's birth.

An angel appeared to Mary to announce the amazing events about to take place in her life: "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O *avored one*, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:26-29, emphasis mine).

Bible scholars say Mary was very young at the time, probably a teenager. Imagine how strange this encounter had to be for her. Here was a simple girl from an obscure village and family, and a massive, fearsome angel stood before her crying, "Greetings, O favored one!"

Then he made an incredible announcement: "The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have *found favor* with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end'" (Luke 1:30-33, emphasis mine).

What amazes me about this encounter is that Mary wasn't afraid. Whenever an angel shows up in the Bible, people tremble and fall to the ground crying, "I am undone!" Not so with Mary. Instead, she was "greatly troubled" — and what troubled her was the angel's greeting: "'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled *at the saying*, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be" (1:28-30, emphasis mine).

Mary seemed uncertain about what she was hearing. It's easy to understand why. She lived in a male-dominated culture with little influence and probably had few expectations for her life. She would have all the privilege of being a good wife and mother but nothing beyond.

Yet Mary was also an Israelite who knew her people's history, and she must have believed in God's ability to transform any circumstance. Surely Mary longed to see a different reality in the brutal world around her. Yet everywhere she looked she saw crushing oppression under the rule of Roman occupiers.

Still, Mary had to be confused by the message spoken to her from heaven: "You have God's favor." Nothing in her life reflected favor of any kind. Yet in reality, a transformation was on the cusp of taking place — in her own life and throughout the world. But it was hard for Mary to imagine any of it.

A lot of us are like Mary. We'd like to see our circumstances transformed. We want to see our sick relative healed of his disease. We want our troubled child to find purpose in Christ. We want our tense marriage to be restored to its former joy.

We'd also like to see a different spiritual reality in the world around us. In cities across our nation, there is more

brokenness than you'd ever expect to find: drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, homeless people, street kids, porn addiction, broken homes. The problems are overwhelming, and the outreaches we dedicate to these problems barely scratch the surface.

Like Mary, we think, "Lord, my life doesn't reflect your favor at all. My sphere of influence seems totally insignificant. I need you to bring your light into it." Yet how would we feel if we heard a voice from heaven telling us, "You have God's favor!"

Personally, I'd have a lot of mixed emotions. I think it's hard for most Christians to grasp a sense of God's favor. We're more comfortable with our obligations to him. But if we heard these words from heaven — "You are my favored one" — most of us wouldn't know how to handle it. All we can see are our weaknesses, our stressful circumstances, our trying situation. We're accustomed to *not* having; we don't think what it would be like for our life to be *favored*.

The Bible has important things to tell us about God's favor. I want to focus on three.

1. Favor comes to the unsuspecting.

If you feel your life doesn't reflect God's favor — that you simply don't deserve it — then you're in exactly the right place. *God is actually looking to favor you* — especially if you cry out like Mary: "Lord, things aren't right. I want to see you glorified in my life and in the world."

When I say God's favor comes to the unsuspecting, I'm talking about people who would never expect it based on the evidence in their lives. These are the people Jesus referred to in the Beatitudes as the "meek." God says, "If you don't have what the world thinks it needs, you're the kind of person I'm looking for." He's attracted to our meekness, our awareness that we don't have what it takes. Those are the ones he loves to work through.

Yet being lowly and meek isn't something we can strive for. Jesus makes this clear in the Beatitudes. He didn't tell people to be poor so they could get a blessing, or to make themselves hungry so they would be fed. He was saying, "You're already poor — and so I'm going to bless you. You're already hungry — so I'm going to be your food."

Mary never had any idea an angel would make a special visitation in her life. But her meekness is exactly what attracted God to her. He loves to use small things to accomplish his great purposes.

2. Favor makes for a dangerous life.

There's another reason I believe Mary was troubled when the angel spoke to her. As I've mentioned, Mary knew her people's history. She would have known what happened to the Israelites who found favor with God. The result was blessed, but it wasn't always pleasant. Consider:

Abel found God's favor through his acceptable sacrifice to the Lord. But Abel's brother, Cain, was jealous because he didn't find the same favor — and Abel paid with his life.

Noah found favor with God. He lived righteously in an evil generation and was spared the destruction of the Flood. Yet every comfort that Noah knew in the world was wiped out. His story of building an amazing ark wasn't some children's story; it was a sad story of judgment on a global scale. Although Noah and his family survived, they lost everything they'd held dear.

Like Noah, Lot found favor with God and was able to escape judgment. God delivered him from Sodom, a city poised to face fiery destruction. But by escaping, Lot lost most things dear to him, including his wife.

Joseph found favor with God and was blessed with prophetic dreams. But the very gift that marked Joseph's favor also angered those around him. His jealous brothers were so enraged by his dreams that they threw him into a pit to die.

My point is that favor is dangerous — and Mary knew this. The Hebrew Scriptures made it clear in story after story: Favor can be accompanied by danger, difficulty, hardship, pressure, persecution, pain, trials and tribulations. Sadly, much of the American church won't acknowledge this about God's favor. Many pastors teach that favor means a

lack of difficulties, being prosperous, having a nice house or car, never being persecuted, always being on top.

Mary knew better. It showed in her response to the angel: “And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). That’s the response I want to have. No matter how dangerous God’s favor is, I don’t want to trade it in for an easy, comfortable life. I don’t want to be off the hook for trouble if it means missing his favor.

My prayer is, “Lord, I want my life to be meaningful for your kingdom’s sake. I know it can never be that way without your favor. So, bring it on, Lord. Give me all that you have — trial or blessing.” We don’t pray this lightly, just as Mary didn’t. But we aren’t to be frightened, as the angel told Mary not to be. Putting aside all fear, we’re able to say, “Lord, our generation needs your favor. May you show it to us for your kingdom’s sake.”

3. Favor is a defining, “from now on” moment.

The visitation from the angel wasn’t some emotional, one-time event for Mary. Gabriel wasn’t just telling her, “Here’s a pat on the back from God. He favors you. He’s for you.” No, this visit was about a binding reality. It caused a change in Mary’s life that meant things would never be the same. Everything she longed for in her heart would now come to pass — but her life would undergo an unimaginable change.

The same is true for us. When we find God’s favor, it doesn’t mean we have a sudden emotional turnaround. The Lord doesn’t tell us, “Things are going to work out for you, so now you can have happy thoughts.” It usually involves the opposite: God rocks our world, turns things upside down and changes the course of our life — all to bring himself glory.

After the angel’s announcement, the Bible says Mary “conceived.” This is what happens for us as well when we find God’s favor. He births something new in our lives. If you have children, you know that once they arrive nothing is ever the same. You and your spouse’s world is turned completely upside down. So it is when God’s favor falls on our lives.

Mary grasped this. She saw that things were going to be different, no matter what trouble might come with it. The angel told her everything that would happen through her child — that he was going to set captives free — and it stirred Mary’s soul. She broke into song:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, *for he has looked on* the humble estate of his servant. For behold, *from now on* all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:46-50, emphases mine).

I want to focus on two highlighted phrases from Mary’s song. First: “He has *looked on* the humble estate of his servant.” Mary realized God had seen her situation, her heart, her fears, hopes and dreams. God “looks on” you and me in the same way. He sees straight into our needs, longings and fears, including the thought that “My life is too impossible even for God to straighten out. Things won’t ever change for me.”

With God’s favor, we can testify as Mary did: “I am blessed by the Lord, because he sees me at all times, in all my circumstances. He can make a transition in my life any time he wants. He can conceive things I could never imagine.”

Now note the second phrase in Mary’s song: “Behold, *from now on*...” Mary realized God was making a transition in her life, and she declared, “*From now on*, I walk in God’s favor. I lay aside all my striving for security and safety. I surrender all my wants and desires to him.”

This is the defining moment that God’s favor brings to our lives. The declaration of “*From now on*” marks a 180-degree change in our direction. Anyone who walks in God’s favor can say, “*From now on*, my addictions have no hold over me. My difficult marriage will be softened because of God’s love. My child who runs from God will feel his wooing conviction.”

When God announces to us that this is the year of his favor, he means *this* year.

God is speaking to you about finding his favor *now* — in 2012, this month, this week, today. At this ministry we’re

encouraged by amazing stories of God's favor transforming lives.

A woman in our church asked me to pray for her husband to be saved. He often left her at night to go out drinking in bars. She had prayed for him for years, doing all she could to show her husband God's love, but he continually rejected it. The marriage had finally worn her down.

I could tell she'd given every last ounce of strength to try to get her husband to change. So I told her, "Go home now. Let the Holy Spirit do the work. Start praying that God will lift the veil from your husband's eyes so he can see his desperate need."

The woman left with her burden slightly lifted. The next day, she appeared in my office with a completely different demeanor. She said, "Pastor Gary, when I came home last night, he was out at the bars again. I tried to sleep but couldn't. I remembered the passage you and I talked about — 2 Corinthians 4:3, about the spirit of the world darkening the minds of nonbelievers. I started praying for the Lord to rip that veil from my husband.

"I was on my knees praying when he walked into the house. He had tears in his eyes. I asked what happened, and he said he was drinking as usual when suddenly he saw how miserable his life was. He knew he needed Christ. He said things just got brighter and brighter to him, as if the glory of the Lord was giving him eyes to see."

That night the man knelt with his wife at their bedside to receive Jesus. This woman had prepared herself to see God work on her husband over a long time, perhaps years, to soften his heart. But God moved on him the very night she prayed and trusted.

When I preached this message on God's favor at The Springs Church in Colorado Springs, a woman who had been an alcoholic for thirty years was sitting in the service. The Holy Spirit spoke to her heart, "Though you have been in despair, my favor is on you. You will see a 180 degree turn." The woman gave her all to the Lord in that service — and she has been sober now for over 100 days. God moved instantly on her after thirty years of an alcoholic haze.

In New York City, a young man who had been homeless for a year stumbled into Times Square Church. He sat through the service, but when it was over he left thinking, "I hate this place. I won't be coming back here." Yet something pulled him back. He came again the next week, and the same thing happened. Again he left saying, "I'm never coming back."

The pattern repeated itself for fifty-two weeks. Finally, after a full year of Sundays, the young man again rose from his seat as the service ended. Only this time he said, "I love you, Jesus, and I need you in my life." He went to the altar and gave his life to Christ.

The pastors at Times Square Church sensed a calling on this young man's life. They helped him go to Bible school, and he turned out to be brilliant. He finished with a 4.0 grade average and enrolled in seminary, where he completed a three-year degree in eighteen months. He was asked to stay on at the seminary as a professor, but he declined, saying, "I'm a pastor."

The same day I delivered this message at The Springs Church, that same young man was preaching at Times Square Church. God's favor had fallen on a homeless, insignificant life — and it made all the difference. No one who saw him sleeping on a park bench would have thought he would someday preach to thousands. God's favor falls on the lowly, and it transforms us completely.

As you consider your own life, you may think God is nowhere to be found. In our human understanding, we might never guess his favor is at work in our circumstance. But God says differently.

Are you in a lowly position, humbled by your trials? Is favor the last thing you expect in your situation? Are you troubled by the idea of God's favor falling on you? I assure you, you're right where you need to be. *God's favor is on you.*

Let this truth begin a song in your heart, as it did with Mary. God is conceiving something new, transforming your trial into his glory. You may not feel his presence, but he has his hand over you. Trust him with all — your heart, your family, your situation — and you will see his glory. Amen.

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