

Luke Chapter 1 v 26 - 56

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[0 : 00] In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, remember that's the mother of John the Baptist, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favoured, the Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary. You found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son. You are to call him Jesus.

He will be great, be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

How will this be? Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin. The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

[1 : 12] So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. 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, for no word from God will ever fail.

I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her. At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zachariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice, she exclaimed, Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will fulfill his promises to her.

And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

[2 : 44] He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months. Then returned home. Please would you turn back to Luke and to chapter one, to those familiar passages concerning the announcement to Mary of the coming Savior and her response to that.

What do you think people are going to say about you at your funeral? Have you thought about that? When you've been to a funeral and there's been a eulogy or a tribute, have you ever thought, well, I wonder what they're going to say about me? Probably lots of nice things, I should think, because that's how we often do.

[3 : 57] Or perhaps, what will I be remembered for when I've died? Those who knew me while I was alive, what will they remember specifically or particularly about my life?

Will there be one particular event, perhaps an accomplishment or a success that's associated with us that people will naturally think of?

Certainly that's the case with some famous people of the past, isn't it? If I was to mention just a person's name, you will all, I think, think of just one achievement, one thing that they did, that particularly out of all the things they did, and they did lots and lots of things, amazing things, but one thing that they did.

So if I say Neil Armstrong, it's the one thing that we think of, the first man who walked on the moon. Don't think of any of the other space missions or the other achievements of his life, that's just the one thing.

If I say Winston Churchill, then immediately we're drawn to the Second World War. The Prime Minister who led the country during the Second World War, but he had a very, very long life and ministry, as it were, through government.

[5 : 09] Government. Albert Einstein. One thing. The theory of relativity. E equals MC squared. One thing that stands out in these people's lives.

One thing that they're remembered for. One thing that particularly tells us of their accomplishments. What about Mary, the mother of Jesus?

She's known for only one thing, isn't she? She's known for being the person who gave birth to the Messiah, the Son of God. But I would have to say that Mary would be horrified to know what people think of her now.

She'd be horrified to know that people worshipped her and prayed to her. She would be appalled by that. And she would deny outright the titles that they give her, like Mother of God.

Or, when they attribute to her grace, that she can deliver and give to other people from herself. She would deny all of these things. And the reason I say that is because of her song.

[6 : 19] Here it is in verses 46 and following. It's called, by some people, by the Latin name, Magnificat. Because in the Latin, my soul magnifies the Lord.

My soul glorifies the Lord. All of her song is about what God has done. It's nothing about what she's done. It's what God has done for her. And what he's done for his people. It's not about anything that she has done for God or that she has done for others.

Mary is one of us. She's a believer. She's one of God's people. Yes, she has and was given a unique calling from God.

But then I have to say to you, dear friends, this evening, each one of us has received a unique calling from God. Here's what Paul writes in Ephesians chapter 4, verse 1.

I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. Each and every Christian believer has received a calling from God.

[7 : 33] A calling that we are to fulfill. A calling which we are to live worthy of.

Mary was called, like we are called, to submit our life to God's will. To replace her plans for God's purposes.

All of us are called by God, and specifically at certain times and seasons of our lives, to do something that we do not naturally or immediately feel able or willing to do.

I'm not just talking about serving God in some service or ministry, though I must say that I don't know of any person in the mission field or in Christian ministry who has not felt a bit like Jonah when they were first called by God to take his message, wanting to avoid that call at all costs. It's not something that is desired naturally in the human heart. But Mary's experience mirrors our own when God particularly calls us to go through a period of sacrifice.

[9 : 05] When God particularly makes us to go through a period of time of temptation, where we're forced to choose between our will and God's will.

When we're brought to a place where there is set before us clearly what God wants, and it runs contrary to what we naturally want.

And that happens a great deal, because our will is often and more likely tainted by our sinful nature. But even if it wasn't, there'd still be that struggle. Think of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who experienced this very thing when, on the night before taking our sin at the cross, he went to the Mount of Olives and prayed.

And what is his prayer? Except an opening up of his heart to show the reality of the struggle within. Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.

[10 : 11] Yet not my will, but yours be done. And then Luke goes on to tell us, Anguish.

Anguish. Struggle. Between my will and God's will. We're going to find ourselves in that position regularly in the Christian life.

We start off that way to begin with. That's how we become a Christian, when we ultimately submit ourselves to God's will, and we declare that we will no longer go our way and please ourselves, but we will turn away from our sin and we will turn to Christ.

But it goes on. In one sense, the continual life of the believer is one of repentance, changing and turning. And that's exactly how it's been for all God's people throughout every generation. Read your Old Testament and your New, and you'll find again and again men and women who were changed in their purposes and plans, and confronted by God to sacrifice.

[11 : 36] Think of Moses, that shepherd of 80 years old, 40 years he'd been in the wilderness, looking after the sheep. He had a family and children, and God comes to him in the burning bush and says, Go back.

Go back to the country you fled from 40 years ago, and tell the king of that country, the most powerful man in the world, that he must set my people free.

It's not surprising, is it, that Moses was less than joyful about the prospect. Think of Gideon in Judges, a timid man who was very good at hide and seek.

His whole country was in the grip of the Midianite army, who oppressed them. And what does God say to him? Raise up an army and face over 100,000 soldiers.

But you're only going to have 300. No wonder he wasn't too keen, either. And then come into the New Testament. Think of Ananias, in Acts chapter 9, as he's praying, God says to him, I want you to go to Saul, Saul the persecutor, Saul the one who arrests and kills every Christian he meets.

[12 : 50] And you're going to go to him in Jesus' name, and you're going to pray for him. No wonder he was not very keen to do God's will.

Each one of them was being called to do something against their natural plan, their natural desires. All of them respond with a sense of surprise, and something less than enthusiasm to begin with. That's how God deals with his people throughout history. That's how he deals with us. He knows that when he speaks to us in his word, when he calls us to live for him, he's calling us to make a radical choice against the flow of the community in which we live, against the flow of the society in which we live, but also against our own native and natural desires.

And I think that is only fair to say concerning Mary. Think how this call of God to bear this child would have gone against the very plans that she had for her own future.

And she would have had plans. Every young woman has plans. Every young woman has a thought. And here she was on the cusp of a new life with her betrothed, with her fiancé, Joseph.

[14 : 11] Looking forward to that wedding day when all the family and all the village would gather around and celebrate with them. Looking forward to setting up a new home with Joseph and with furniture that he would have made.

Looking forward to having children together with him and living a full and happy life in Nazareth, in the community. That's nothing like what God had in mind for her, though.

What God was proposing never crossed her mind. She never thought that she would bear a child before she was married. She never thought that she would have to face the possibility of all of her dreams being shattered and ruined.

Think of the disgrace in those days of an unmarried mother. Not only upon herself, but upon her family. Upon her fiancé.

Who would blame Joseph for wanting to put her aside quietly as he was tempted to do when he found out that she was pregnant and that he wasn't the father?

[15 : 16] Rejection from society, rejection from community would follow her all her life. A stigma and a name would be attached to her. Wouldn't we have said to her, perhaps if she had come to us for advice in this situation, you've got every right, Mary, to say that's not fair.

Why should I have to give up so much of my dream and my wants and my desires and my hopes? Wouldn't it be natural for her, as it has been the case for some of us, to say to her, yes, God, if I must.

Gritted teeth, you see. And yet, when Gabriel speaks to her, he doesn't speak apologetically, does he?

He doesn't say, Mary, I'm awfully sorry to have to ask you this and I know it's going to turn your world upside down and I realize it's going to be very difficult for you. No, he doesn't say that at all. When he greets her at the very start, he says to her, Mary, greetings, you who are highly favored. In other words, what I'm about to tell you, what I'm about to tell you that God desires for you, what I'm about to reveal to you concerning God's will is not something that you should be afraid of or run away from or take as a sign of God's displeasure or think in any way that God is trying to ruin you or to make your life less than you would dream for it to be.

[16:59] Rather, this message that I bring to you for God, this purpose that God has for you is a sign of his intense affection for you, his great love for you.

God's will is always a revelation of his love for us. As Gabriel speaks and reveals God's will for Mary, we see something, I believe, of a journey going on in her faith, a growing peace that pervades her mind and heart as she begins to grasp and gladly at the end submit herself to the purposes and will in God for her life.

Let's look at that journey together in three simple steps. She begins, as all of us would naturally begin if this was to happen to us, with a sense of anxiety.

Her immediate response is very natural, isn't it? Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Well, of course you would be.

she's anxious and she's, pardon me, she's afraid because the angel says don't be afraid. What's going on?

[18:18] What's happening? That's not how we react. When either through God's word or particularly through circumstances, God's will is revealed to us as something which we don't naturally want or desire.

Don't we respond in a similar way? We're afraid. We're afraid of the unknown. What will come of this? And our minds race the possibilities of what might happen to us in the future, what the outcome will be.

We know what it is to be anxious, don't we? Scripture tells us do not be anxious in anything but with everything. Commit all of your prayers to God. But we are anxious people. We don't like not knowing.

We like to be in control. We like to feel that we've got a handle on everything and that our plans and purposes are the right ones and will work out.

We don't like releasing and letting go that God should have his will and way in our lives. If we're honest, dear friends, aren't all of us holding on to something?

[19:38] Some dream, some purpose, some plan, some pleasure and we're saying, Lord, you can have everything else but you can't have this. You alone know what it is.

And yet Gabriel, as he speaks, as God's messenger, comfort so with the assurance, the Lord is with you. The Lord is with you.

He's not against you. Our reaction can often be when God speaks with us or deals with us or tests us or tempts us or tries us.

Our temptation is to think, where is God? Where is he gone? Why has he forsaken me? Why are these things happening?

But his promise, again, is our refuge, isn't it? I will never leave you nor will I forsake you. It was the comfort, of course, that David, the king, knew when he wrote for us that wonderful 23rd Psalm, the Lord is my shepherd.

[20:49] What does he say? When I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, I'm going to be anxious and worried and terrified and I'm going to really struggle because this can't be your will for me, God.

No, he doesn't say that, does he? I will fear no evil for you are with me. Greetings. You who are highly favoured, the Lord is with you.

So she begins in a place for anxiety, not only because an angel has come and spoken to her, but again, there is clearly some sense in which this angel is revealing to her the will of God and that's exactly what he does, doesn't he?

From verse 31, you will conceive and give birth to a son, you to call him Jesus, who will be great and be called the son of the most high. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end. The will of God is presented to her, the purposes and plans of God are made known to her and it's natural that her next response is to ask.

[21:57] First there's an anxiety, then there's an asking. There it is in verse 34, how will this be? Mary asks the angel since I am a virgin, an unmarried young woman.

It's not a question born of unbelief. She's not saying, that's impossible. That can't happen. That can't be right.

She's asking, how can this be? It's a sincere desire to understand God's will for her life, a sincere desire to understand what is it that God is asking of her.

How is he going to do this? There's a sense in which she feels herself inadequate, unable. And it's an answer to which she receives a reply.

That in itself shows that this is a proper question. The angel answered her. It's not perhaps the answer that she wanted. It doesn't give us here the full and complete biological explanation, but it was enough for her.

[23 : 05] It's not wrong to question God, dear friends. We find that again and again through God's people. The example is that they question God. They question God with questions that they didn't have the answer to.

Well, that's the right thing to do. Surely, if we don't know something, we're to ask God who knows everything. What are you doing here, Lord? What is your will?

How will you bring this about? Faith is not stoicism. In other words, faith is not simply saying what will be, will be. *Que sera, sera*.

Faith is being able to trust God without knowing all the answers beforehand. But faith still questions, asks, seeks to understand.

And, more often than not, the reality is that like Mary, we receive a reply from God, but it may not be everything that we want. It may not be a full declaration or revelation of the nitty-gritty.

[24 : 17] You see, for that reason, God gives us his promises. He doesn't tell us exactly what's going to happen in the future. He doesn't tell us exactly what problems we will face and how we will overcome them or what grace he will give, but he gives us promises that we can trust him.

Promises that we know that we can trust God whatever we face. again, there's a repetition, isn't there, in verse 30, do not be afraid, Mary, you found favor with God.

It's the same words as you are highly favored. What God is saying to you through me, what God is planning for you and revealing through me is out of his love for you, his grace for you.

Whatever comes our way, it is always coming from a heart of love. It is always motivated by grace. His dealings with us are not because of our sin or his anger.

God doesn't deal with his children in that way because our sin has been dealt with at the cross. He always deals with us out of grace. He will never, ever, dear friends, call us to endure or to sacrifice or to go through something or to make a choice which is painful except for his grace because he has good things in store for us which we can't see and may be clouded by our own dreams.

[25 : 59] Notice as well, in answering that question, how will this be, Gabriel points her to Elizabeth. He gives us, dear friends, or her particularly, the added help of others, of brothers and sisters in Christ.

Yes, she was a relative, but she was somebody who had experienced also God's will and actions which were completely surprising and unexpected.

She was going through something similar. Even Elizabeth, your relative, who's going to have a child in her old age, she who was said to be unable to conceive, barren, is in her sixth month all through her married life.

She had never been able to conceive a child and now she is in old age, well beyond the age of childbearing and now, miraculously, because of God's purpose and plan for her, she's pregnant. How can that be? For no word from God will fail, no promise of God will fail. Everything that God says he will do. The wonderful thing is that God places us, dear friends, in church families to support one another, to encourage one another, to help one another, because ultimately, as I said at the beginning, we're all like Mary, no matter who we are.

[27 : 28] We may think that our particular struggle or sacrifice or hardship or whatever it may be is unique to us. Well, it may be unique in the details, the nitty-gritty, but it's not unique in the principle, because every single Christian will face what Mary faced.

Every single Christian will go through that struggle that you and I go through. We're not alone. And if I can put it in this way, it's not helpful to just say fine.

When somebody says, how are you? Fine. Well, I know that you're not trying to be difficult. I know you're not trying to be a moany, grumpy person, but sometimes it's important to be able to say, no, it's not all fine.

Things are tough at the moment. I'm wrestling. I feel like Jacob with God. I'm finding it hard. Please pray for me. You don't know what a comfort that is, what a help that is to one another.

Peter writes to the Christian believers who were struggling and he tells them this, stand firm in the faith because you know that your brothers throughout this world are undergoing the same kind of

suffering.

[28 : 46] feelings. There's comfort in the assurance that we're not alone. Because that's exactly, again, what the devil would have us to think, isn't it?

God is calling you to do something which he doesn't call anybody else to go through. They've not had to suffer in that way. They've not had to face those difficulties. They've not had to make those choices.

Of course they have. God is not treating you and I, dear friends, any differently from any other of his saints. He's not picking you out for special problems.

He's not picking you out for special difficulties. We're all together, innit? We're all in the same boat. We're all in the same storm in the same boat.

God has been faithful to his people throughout time and is continuing to be faithful to his people now, then we can be sure that he will be faithful to us.

[29 : 51] He'll be faithful to you. He hasn't changed, nor will he change. What he's done before, he will do again. That's the reliability of God.

That's the steadfastness of God. We haven't got a God who is given to tantrum or to change or to being one day he's feeling like all is well and the next day he's low.

Not like us. We're like roller coasters, aren't we? Oh, we're having a bad day today. Yes, you had a bad day yesterday and the day before.

Sometimes bad days can last for months, but then good days come. And so we find at the end, don't we, after the angel leads and guides Mary from anxiety to asking, we find that ultimately she comes to a place of acceptance.

Verse 38, I am the Lord's servant. May your word be fulfilled. In other words, may your will be done. In spite of her natural fears, questions, Mary gladly declares that her will is yielded to God's purpose for her.

[31 : 09] That she's not going to fight against it. She's not going to wrestle. She's not going to argue with God and say, no, it's not fair and no, you can't do this.

It's not simply either just resignation. not simply accepting this is the way it has to be.

It's faith. Her faith is in the person, the promises and the power of her God. And it has produced in her a peace.

Yes, God is for me and with me. Yes, God is dealing with me in grace and mercy. Yes, God is able to do this which seems impossible for me.

Yes, I can trust him and I do trust him. She doesn't know everything. She doesn't foresee all that will happen to her.

[32 : 13] The sorrow, the grief, the confusion that she will go through herself ultimately particularly as she sees her own son cruelly murdered.

But she knows that she can trust God for whatever comes her way. Dear friends, the only way that we can know peace is through acceptance.

Joyful, faith-filled acceptance that God's will is best. Now, for most of us, that journey from anxiety to peace will not be as quick as one conversation, but then we haven't got an angel to speak to us. But it is a process. It is something that God will help us to work through. He's given us his Holy Spirit so that he will counsel us, guide us.

He's given us his word which is clear for us and he's given us his people to strengthen and support and help us. Jesus said to his disciples in John 14, I'll ask the Father, he will give you another advocate or helper or comforter to help you and be with you forever.

[33 : 33] What is God calling you to? What is he calling you to perhaps give up? A dream, a hope, God.

Do you think God knows better and knows what's best? Do you think that God wants for you something even more wonderful than you can imagine and dream of?

Then trust him. Not in the empty way, let go and let God. but give up and trust.

Stop holding on to that precious thought, dream, ideal, hope. Give it to the Lord. Whatever you have in store for me, Lord, I want your will to be done.

Let us be able to pray as Mary prayed, I'm the Lord's servant. May your word be fulfilled. Lord to me. Ultimately, we're not following Mary's example, are we?

[34 : 52] We're following Christ's. We're being Christ's people who prayed, not my will, but yours be done.

Let's take a moment's quietness and prayer to respond to ■■ to Hag ee