

1st Commandment

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[0 : 0 0] . . . Little lambs had their Christmas party on Friday morning, and they had a very special visitor.

I wonder if you know who that very special visitor was. Well, it was Santa, of course. He visited their party on Friday morning. Now, if I say so myself, he was a particularly young, sprightly, and handsome Santa. Now, I can only assume that he's been working out. Now, some cruelly suggested that he was wearing a wig and was actually bald, but that suggestion borders on the defamatory.

Anyway, Santa had a wee and surprising message for the children. He assured them that he was not the most important Christmas character. Rather, the most important Christmas character was a wee baby born in Bethlehem by the name of Jesus. Now, I say surprising. Perhaps that is not that surprising. I hope it's not that surprising, and I'm sure it's not that surprising for us gathered here this morning. But I wonder, who is the next most important character in the Christmas story? Clearly, the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, the Word made flesh, fills the Christmas story, occupies that central position, not only of the Christmas story, but indeed of the universe itself. But as we do think of the events surrounding his birth, who might we identify as the most important character? Well, there are many who are involved in one way or another in the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. We know of the wise men and of the shepherds, of Joseph and of Herod, and no doubt others could be mentioned. But if we were to identify one who, in some measure, stands above the others in terms of the part that they play,

I think we would be justified in identifying Mary as occupying that position, that place of honor, we might say. And I want to think about Mary this morning. I think it's good to do so for a couple of reasons. The second more important than the first, but we'll mention the first one as well. In our own Protestant tradition, perhaps in reaction to the place that Mary has been given, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition, we have been reluctant, perhaps, to even speak much of Mary and to recognize what she can teach us as an example of faith, as an example of a godly young woman. We recognize that there are errors that have been and continue to be committed concerning the place that she occupies in, as I say, Roman Catholic theology and practice. But in our concern not to fall foul of those errors, and we must call them errors, maybe we are guilty of failing to give her the honor and the recognition that she deserves in the story of redemption. And so, in the measure that we may have been guilty of that, it's good to redress the balance. But more importantly than being concerned as to what others may have said or think or believe concerning Mary, more importantly, we simply recognize that she has much to teach us. And as we approach Christmas, this would seem as good a time as any to listen to the lessons that we can learn from her. Now, this morning we've read from the moment in which

Mary is given the news by Gabriel concerning the impending birth of Jesus, and we're told as to how she reacts to that news. Her visit to Elizabeth, and then the Magnificat, this song that she sings, inspired by the very Spirit of God in response to this wonderful, marvelous news that she has received.

[4 : 44] We're going to concentrate our attention from verse 39 as she heads to visit Elizabeth, and then the very beginning of this song that is recorded for us. We're not going to consider all that is said there.

There is so much that is said there, but we will, this morning, consider her visit to Elizabeth, and then the very beginning of the song that she sings in gratitude and in worship to her God.

And as we do, we want to see how Mary serves as an example for us, an example and a challenge. We might call it a Christmas challenge for us this morning. Now, I'm going to outline five things that I want to consider this morning concerning Mary, very particularly in the context of the events that we have read about. Five things that we'll consider briefly in turn. First of all, to notice the humanity of Mary. Or to put it another way, Mary is just like you and me in terms of her humanity.

She's a very normal person, and we'll just consider briefly how that is very vividly illustrated in the events described that we've read. Mary is like you and me. But also we'll notice how Mary is blessed.

She is described very explicitly in these terms as blessed, as favored, and we want to think about that for a moment. Then also notice that Mary believes. This is maybe, or perhaps we could describe it as central to what we want to highlight, and certainly in the sense of how Mary serves as a challenge as an example to us. The manner in which she believes, the quality of her faith, the depth of her faith, as it finds expression, again, in the events recorded. But then fourthly, we find Mary worshipping.

[6 : 54] Mary worships her Savior. And again, here she stands as one who has much to teach us. And then finally, to notice, to notice, and the order may seem unusual, but we simply follow the order as we have it presented to us in the passage that we've read. A final thing we want to just notice and touch on and comment on is that Mary is saved. Mary is saved. Well, let's think of these things in turn.

First of all, Mary is like you and me, the humanity of Mary. Try and imagine, and it is probably an impossible task that I'm giving you, but try and imagine how Mary must have felt on receiving the message from Gabriel. What must she have been thinking as she hears these words that are addressed to her? The messenger himself was sufficient to leave her awestruck, but the content of the message was even more awesome than the messenger himself. Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. And the angel continues with this awesome, literally awesome message for Mary. How must she have felt? What thoughts must have rushed through her mind as she hears these words being addressed to her? Well, in a measure, we know the answer to that question, for we are told. Then in verse 29, we read, Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Now, this is even before she's been given the most remarkable news. She's already greatly troubled. One can only imagine how that must have multiplied in intensity as the angel continues to deliver his message. And indeed, even in being told that she was greatly troubled, that she was wondering at what this was all about, as she experienced a measure of confusion and bemusement at what is going on. We're conscious that even in the measure that that is described for us, we are faced with a situation where human language meets with its limitations.

Human language is simply incapable of adequately describing for us the manner in which Mary responds or reacts or reacts or the thoughts that go through her mind, the emotions that she experiences in the face of this messenger and the message that he brings. We are also told that following her being greatly troubled and bemused and confused by all that is going on, there is a point that she reaches very quickly of faith-filled acceptance, a remarkable acceptance as is demonstrated for us in these very powerful words of Mary in verse 38, I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.

It would be difficult to find in the whole of Scripture words that reflect a deeper faith, words that reflect a greater submission to the will of God than these words related for us here from the mouth of Mary.

But I introduced this first point by saying that I wanted to consider the humanity of Jesus. And as we continue to think a little bit about Mary's reaction, as we recognize our limitations in being able to fully understand what she must have felt or thought, what we can do is move on and consider what she did.

[11 : 01] I think it is here that very particularly we are faced with Mary in her humanity. What does she do having received this message? Well, we're told she looks for a friend.

She looks for somebody she can trust. Here is a young girl. She is vulnerable. She is fragile. And she needs a friend that she can trust.

She needs a friend with whom she can share. She needs a friend who can help her. And the intensity of her need is vividly illustrated by the image that is painted of this young girl hurrying to the hill country of Judea.

We read then in verse 39, At that time, having received this message in the immediate aftermath of this visit from Gabriel, at that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea.

We can almost imagine the picture of this young girl hurrying as fast as her legs can carry her because she must spend time with Elizabeth.

[12 : 10] She needs somebody with whom she can speak. She needs somebody she can trust. Now, of course, the angel had already pointed her in that direction when in the message that he brought he spoke of Elizabeth.

And no doubt this was the spur, as it were, for Mary to seek that help, to seek that company, to seek that trusting friend in the person of Elizabeth.

But, of course, she was entirely appropriate for the need that Mary had. The news Mary received was unique and unrepeatable.

But the need that she had of a friend she could trust is a universal need. And there is here, perhaps not so much in Mary. In Mary we recognize the need, but perhaps in Elizabeth we find a challenge for us.

Are we like Elizabeth? Are we the kind of friends that those who are faced with news, with circumstances, with situations where they need a friend, somebody they can trust, somebody they can be with, somebody they can turn to?

[13 : 29] Are we that kind of friend? Do we have a friend like Elizabeth? Do we have somebody we can turn to? Not in circumstances like these. That would be illegitimate to even suggest that we would face such circumstances as these.

But in times of confusion, in times of crisis, in times when we cannot be alone. Indeed, it is not healthy for us to be alone. Friendship.

Friendship. The friendship that Mary enjoyed with Elizabeth is a gift, a gift from God. And it is a gift for us to grasp. It is a gift for us to cultivate, and all the more so within the family of the faith.

That within the family of the faith, within the family of God, we would know what it is to be such a friend and to have such a friend. Mary is like you and me.

Vulnerable, fragile, confused, in need of a friend. And God provides graciously even for that need that she has. It's also interesting as we just move on to notice in the response of Mary, there is not only this need of a friend, but the need of somebody to share good news with.

[14 : 50] Is that not very much part of our humanity? That when we have good news, we need to share it. We need to tell somebody. We need to publish it abroad when there is good news to tell.

Well, this is certainly true of Mary. Mary shares what the Lord had done for her. And let us, at all times, but very especially let us pick up the challenge in these days that lie ahead, follow that example of sharing with others the good things that the Lord has done for us.

Mary is like you and me. But also, Mary is blessed. She is so described. The angel described her in that way. And then Elizabeth takes that same language.

And in verse 42, we read, In a loud voice, she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear.

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, reveals or confirms the truth that had already been revealed, that Mary was blessed. What does it mean?

[16 : 00] What does it mean to describe Mary in these terms? Well, a blessed person is one who enjoys the favor of God. Indeed, that is the manner in which the language is presented in verse 28.

You who are highly favored to be blessed is to be favored by God, to enjoy the favor of God. It is more than just a synonym for happy, though happy is a related word, certainly.

But if we could draw a distinction, and it is a little arbitrary, but I think helpful. If we could draw a distinction between happiness and blessedness, we could say that happiness generally relates to how a person feels.

But blessed refers to what a person is. And Mary was a blessed woman. Now, no doubt that found expression in happiness, in the emotion, if you wish, of happiness.

But she was blessed. She was objectively a blessed woman. To be blessed is a status that is born entirely of the good favor of God.

[17 : 11] God chose to bless, to favor Mary in this very particular way. Mary was blessed by God. The language used there in verse 42, the language that Elizabeth uses, suggests that Mary was the most blessed of women.

Blessed are you among women. Of all the women, you are blessed in a primary or in a particular or in a special way among them.

The blessing was not exclusive to Mary, but it was a special, particular blessing that Mary enjoyed. This privilege that she was granted, this unbelievable, almost in a literal sense, almost, this privilege to carry in her womb the Savior, the Creator of the universe, the Eternal Son of God.

This privilege defies description, defies measurement. She was uniquely blessed in a manner never before or since experienced by a woman.

But I do stress, as I've just a moment ago hinted at, though uniquely blessed, by no means exclusively blessed. At the very heart of God's purpose for His covenant people is that we might be a blessed people.

[18 : 36] Indeed, we are a blessed people. The very purpose of granting to Mary this particular blessing was that through the child she would bear, the nations of the world would be blessed.

As with Mary, this blessing that we enjoy, that is our status, if you wish, is born of the sovereign grace of God who chooses to bless and to favor us, His people.

We are a blessed people. You are blessed. If you are trusting in the one born in Bethlehem as your Lord and Savior, then you are blessed.

Regardless of how you feel, regardless if you are experiencing, if you wish, happiness today or this morning, you are blessed. We are blessed.

That is simply the way it is. So Mary is like us. She's very human. She is blessed. But also what is very central to the account that we have before us is the description, the presentation of how she believes.

[19 : 50] She is a believer in a very profound sense of that word. Indeed, Elizabeth, as she goes on to address Mary, makes reference to this in verse 45.

Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished. Mary believes.

She is described as being one who has believed the message that God has given her. Now, perhaps here it's helpful to clarify in connection with what has just been said concerning her being blessed, that there isn't intended here a causal connection between her believing and her being blessed.

Perhaps if we only had verse 45, we might be tempted or drawn to that conclusion. Blessed is she who has believed. As if somehow it was her belief that is the cause of her blessing.

But that is not what is being said. The blessing, as already stated, was an objective reality. She would give birth to this son, even if she hadn't believed.

[21 : 01] It may be as foolish to even consider that possibility because we have what we have and we thank God for what happened. But the reality is that the child would be born of Mary, independently, if you wish, of whether she had believed the message or not.

So, her blessing is not caused by her belief. Nonetheless, there is a connection. The connection is, if you wish, in the sense that Mary experiences the blessing.

She enjoys the blessing in the measure that she believes. Her appreciation of her blessed state, her enjoyment, her experience of the blessing of God is greater, is magnified, if you wish, in the measure that she believes the message to be true.

What did she believe? She is described as believing, but what did she believe? Well, particularly and concisely, the reference here is to the message that had been brought, the message that God gave her through His messenger, through the angel.

And when you consider the message, and it's not necessary to do so in any great depth, but even as we do fleetingly, all it does is magnify the extent to which her faith is so remarkable.

[22 : 29] When did she believe this message? This message that she would give birth to a child? Well, she believed it to be true before there was any outside, if you wish, confirmation.

She is told that she will give birth to a child, but at that point, there is nothing other than the message to confirm that. There is nothing in her physical makeup for her to say, oh, well, yes, now I understand.

No pregnancy tests that she could take to see, well, is it actually true? As yet, nothing to indicate that these things would happen. She is not given this message when she's already a few months pregnant and very confused as to why that is.

No, even at the point at which she is given the message is the point at which it would seem so entirely unlikely that she would believe it. And of course, the message itself was the most incredible, literally the most incredible message ever delivered to a virgin.

And yet she believes. She manifests her belief. She manifests her faith. She manifests her trust in God because this is at the heart of her belief, her trusting in God, her trusting and submitting to God's will.

[23 : 46] She manifests her faith in humble and joyful submission. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered.

May it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her. There was nothing more that needed to be done. What more could the angel do? What more was it necessary to do?

What more was it necessary to say? Given the manner in which Mary humbly and joyfully submits to God's will.

I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said. Mary, as we suggested, has much to teach us. But if we were to stress one thing above all others, it would have to be her faith, her believing, her trusting, the exemplary manner in which she simply believes and submits to the will of God for her life.

We as Christians are blessed by God. His blessing is not a reward for our faith. It precedes our faith.

[24 : 53] But like Mary, we are to believe. Like Mary, we will experience and enjoy the blessing of God. Our status as God's people will be experienced and enjoying in the measure that we with Mary believe.

Believe the truths concerning who we are and who God is and believe the plans and the purposes that He has for us and humbly and joyfully submit to them.

This belief of Mary is at heart a trusting in the goodness and wisdom of God as He directs our lives and sometimes surprising and unexpected, indeed sometimes unpleasant directions.

Well, where do we stand in this regard? Do you believe? Do you believe in God? Do you trust in God? Do you humbly submit to God's will for your life?

Are you trusting in God this morning? We have much to learn from Mary. But as we move on, we notice also that Mary worships.

[26 : 01] There at the beginning of the Magnificat, Mary's song and Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Her blessing does not result in her glorying in her own privilege and status in the purposes of God. We've already stressed that she is very human. And as one who is very human, she was prone, of course, as we all are, to temptations of many kinds.

And would this not have been a temptation for Mary to glory in her own status? How special I am. Of all the women, I'm the one that God has seen fit to place His eyes upon for this marvelous purpose.

Surely there must have been a measure of temptation to think along these lines. And yet, how does she express the conviction of her soul?

She doesn't glorify in herself. Rather, my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Her own privilege, her own status, and the purposes of God bring her to the place of worship and adoration.

[27 : 15] The blessing of God brings her to her knees in joyful worship and adoration of her God. Indeed, as we read these opening words of her song, do we not hear echoing of the song of Mary in the first question and answer of our shorter catechism, which is familiar to us?

What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. That is really, effectively, what Mary is saying. My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Indeed, if we were to have asked Mary, if indeed the question had been framed at that time and anybody were to have asked Mary, what is your chief end?

Well, she could have simply answered by singing this first line of the song before us. My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

That is what I do. That is what I am about. I am about glorifying God and enjoying God. And as it was so for Mary, so it is so for us that this would be our chief end, that this would be our song.

[28 : 34] My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Maybe worships. Do you worship?

If you don't worship, you're not a Christian. It's as simple as that. We don't need to hedge that statement around with qualifying remarks. It's that simple. If you don't worship, you're not a Christian.

He who believes worships. You cannot divorce the two. It is not possible to do so. Belief, trust in God must be accompanied by the worship of God.

And if there is no worship, then there is not faith. Mary worships. But the final thing we want to notice here concerning Mary, and it is Mary herself who provides us with the data, if you wish, is this.

Mary is saved. Mary is just like you and me. Mary is a human being with all the characteristics of humanity.

[29 : 41] She, we have noticed also, not only is like you and me, she is particularly and especially blessed and favored of God. She believes in a remarkable and exemplary way.

She worships. She worships her God. But she is also, and she describes herself as one who is saved. Again, these opening words of her song illustrate that for us.

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. As I suggested at the beginning, that may seem a bit of a non sequitur given all that we have said concerning Mary.

We've already said that she's a believer. We've already said that she worships God. We've already said that that is at the heart of who she is. Presumably, she must be saved. But as we simply follow the order of the text as Mary voices her praise of God, we find her testifying to His saving work in her life.

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. What is she saying as she describes God as her Savior? Well, she is recognizing her need of a Savior and recognizing that only God can grant the salvation that she needs, that she requires.

[31 : 00] Saved from what? Well, saved from her sin. Saved from her guilt. Mary recognizes this truth that she, along with all men and women, before and after her, she was a sinner in need of a Savior.

has no difficulty in recognizing that and indeed in glorying in God as her Savior. God is the one who can rescue her from her own sin and from her own guilt.

God is the one who can save her from her natural condition. Mary was saved. Mary was conscious of her need of a Savior. Mary was saved in the fullness of time and in the purpose of God by the death in her place of the very child that she bore in her womb.

And as we consider that truth concerning Mary, we close by asking ourselves that question. Where do we stand? What about you? Are you saved?

Even that question now when we hear it posed maybe in the world in which we live, the society in which we live, it is only posed or seldom posed in anything other than mocking terms. the very language of being saved is deemed something that we laugh at and joke about.

[32 : 18] That's something that strange, weird people talk about. But it is at the heart of who we are and it is the most important question that we can respond to. Are you saved? Have you recognized with Mary that you are a sinner in need of a Savior?

Have you cried out to the Savior who has been provided for you, Jesus Christ, who died on Calvary's tree in the place of sinners? Have you cried out to Him that He would save you, that He would forgive you?

Why did Jesus come? Well, we've already thought about that even this morning as we were sharing with the children. He came to save. You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.

He came to save, and He can save you. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come before You and we thank You for Your goodness to us.

We thank You for Your decision to favor and to bless us. We thank You that we are the grateful objects of Your sovereign grace. We thank You that we come before You not to plead our own merits or to consider that Your grace and favor upon us is because of anything good in ourselves, but rather to humbly recognize that You have been pleased to bless us.

[33 : 41] And we ask that You would help us to respond in the manner that is fitting, that with Mary we would know what it is to cry out in joyful praise, that we rejoice in God our Savior, that our soul would glorify You.

Lord, we ask that You would help us to be those who grow and deepen in the expression of our faith, that we would be those who with Mary know what it is to submit humbly and yet confidently in Your sovereign will, confident in the assurance that everything You do in us and for us is for our good, confident in the assurance that You are our loving Heavenly Father, and even the difficult and unpleasant circumstances in life are placed before us and ordered by You for our good.

And so, we are able with Mary to submit ourselves gladly to Your perfect will for our lives.

And we pray also that with Mary we would be of those who share good news, that as she was bursting to tell another, as she had this imposed a duty upon her that she would make known the good news that she had heard.

So, we too would know something of that in our own experience, that we would be of those who, having been and continuing to be the objects of Your saving grace, we too might share with others all that You have done for us and indeed all that You would do for any who would but come and put their trust in You.

[35 : 20] And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, we'll close our service this morning by singing in Psalm 92 in the Scottish Psalter, Psalm 92 on page 352.

Psalm 92 on page 352 and we'll sing the first four verses of the psalm and we'll sing to the tune St. Fulbert. To render thanks unto the Lord it is a comely thing and to Thy name, O Thou Most High, do praise aloud to sing.

Psalm 92 verses 1 to 4 and we'll stand to sing. though his name on James st. Fulber in Sists.

St. Fulber of the Sistence of God and gifts toGU to sing.

Thy loving thy best to show forth when shines the glory night.

[36 : 45] And to thee have thy faithfulness with pleasure every night.

O thou thy mission that is the holy Route Queue Shoe.

And all the heart with solemn sun and great sweet melody.

O the Lord, my guide, my dear earth, has made thy heart quite proud.

And I will triumph in the world which by thine hands were made.

[37 : 54] Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and always. Amen.