



## **BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas**

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I think it was 1980, I was in my last year college in Chicago. And the big news was that the Pope was coming to Chicago. And I thought, well, that'd be interesting to see the Pope in person. And so, on that particular day, when the Pope was coming into downtown Chicago and was going to a large Catholic church, I went down there, and when I got there, there were thousands of people lined up along the street. And so, I just lined up with them and we waited and waited for probably close to a half hour. And pretty soon, here comes this motorcade of police cars and then limousines. And finally, there's this big white limo. It stops right in front of the church and out get the Secret Service people. And then out climbs the Pope. And he got out and he kind of looked around, and then a most amazing thing happened. I was staring right at him, and he looked, and he stared right at me. And all of a sudden, he started to walk right toward me. And the Secret Service is kind of maneuvering around, trying to keep up with him. He walked right up to me and he put his hand on my forehead, and he prayed some prayer in Italian, ("I don't know what you're even saying.") And then he invited me to go into the church with him. Well, actually that's not quite the way it happened. I was there. I was there in the crowd, and he got out, and he didn't even wave. He just was surrounded by Secret Service and they took him right into the church. I was nobody. I was a face in the crowd.

It happened to me again a couple of years ago. We were in Washington, D.C. All the way out, I had told my girls that one of the purposes for going was I needed about 10 minutes with the Vice President. I was concerned about his environmental policies; they were going to kind of get in the way of my fishing. So, I thought 10 minutes, that's reasonable. So, we were in the nation's Capital building. We're taking our tour and we got off the elevator, and there were Secret Service and police there, and they just stopped us. They wouldn't let us go any farther, and before we could really ask why, there went the Vice President and his entourage walking right by. My girls looked at me like, "Dad, this is your chance." But the guys in front of us had loaded weapons, and he didn't even stop and chat; didn't ask me my opinion. I was just a face in the crowd, a nobody.

In Broken Bow, they used to have what was called the One Box Hunt. They still have it and they bring celebrities into town to participate in this. And right after the Gulf War, General Schwarzkopf came to participate in the One Box Hunt. I waited all evening. I had cookies, I had coffee. I thought for sure he'd call, stop by. I thought we could chat about the war and see how things were going. He didn't even call.

President Bush came to Omaha for the College World Series. I mean Firth isn't that far from Omaha. I thought maybe he'd swing by and say, "Hi". He didn't; he didn't even call. You see, in this world's culture, I'm a nobody; I am; I'm a nobody. I'm a face in the crowd. I don't have access to kings and presidents. I just don't, never will. But that's what I like about the Christmas

story, because the Christmas story reminds us that there is another way. I think that's why the Christmas story is so hope-filled to people that are just ordinary people; that are poor; people that are disadvantaged; people that are suffering. It's because there's something in the story of Christmas. When God came near, he didn't come to the kings. He didn't come to the rulers; didn't come to the rich and powerful. He came to the ordinary; to the face in the crowd. There's something about that that reminds us in this culture in which we live, that maybe there is another way. Maybe there's another kingdom where I can be somebody.

The story of Christmas really goes all the way back to Genesis Chapter Three, when Adam and Eve sinned against God and were thrown out of Paradise; and there in Genesis Three, there is the slightest hint that God's going to do something to get us back to Paradise. It would come through the seed of a woman, and we're told that the enemy would bruise the heel of the seed of the woman, but the seed of the woman would crush the head of the enemy, that the victory would be won. Throughout the Old Testament, that concept is developed. We're introduced to images, pictures that the blood of the Lamb would be shed for the sins of the world, and the prophets begin to develop this understanding of a coming Messiah.

One of the passages we're very familiar with at Christmas time is in Isaiah Chapter Nine.

Isaiah says,

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;  
And the government will rest on His shoulders;  
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.  
There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,  
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness  
From then on and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this. (\*NASB Isaiah 9:6-7)

Well, the Jewish people began to understand the concept of a coming Messiah, this "son" that would be born. But by the time you get to the end of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, God's had it up to here with His people. As a matter of fact, He says that; He says, "I've had it up to here with you and your sacrifices and the way you treat Me." And so, God judged these people, and His judgment was for 400 years He would remain silent. And He did. And during those 400 years, these people suffered. The Jewish people suffered the oppression of one nation after another, conquering them, oppressing them and abusing them. And they held onto this hope that there was a Messiah that was coming, that would set them free, that would deliver them from this tyranny.

While under the oppression of the Roman government in the first century, that blessed night, the shepherds were out in their field and the angels appeared to say that grand event was here, but the angels didn't go to the religious establishment. They didn't go to the priests. They didn't go to the kings. They didn't go to the rich and powerful. The angels appeared to the shepherds: the lowliest of the low. A shepherd was so low that they were forbidden to testify in a court of law. They had nothing to say, but that is who the angels appear to. The shepherds went down into Bethlehem to see the Christ child, and they begin to tell Mary and Joseph and the people that were there, what they had been told by the angels. And so, everybody marveled at what they

heard. And probably for the first time in their lives, they were players. They mattered; they had something to contribute.

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The shepherds went down into Bethlehem to see the Christ child, and they begin to tell Mary and Joseph and the people that were there, what they had been told by the angels.

Nine months before that, the Angel Gabriel had come to a couple in a very obscure village called Nazareth. When we hear Nazareth, we think of the home of Jesus. It doesn't carry for us the same stigma that it did in the first century. Nazareth was in Galilee - a small village, probably 1500 to 2000 people - and it was a place that had a reputation. It was the wrong side of the tracks. As a matter of fact, when Nathaniel, who was a righteous man, heard that Jesus was from Nazareth, he said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That's how everybody felt. It was the ghetto; it was a place of poverty; it was a mongrel people and they were disdained, but they're in that small village. There was a poor carpenter - everybody was poor in Nazareth - probably in his mid-twenties, by the name of Joseph, and Joseph was betrothed to a young virgin girl by the name of Mary. Now, Mary was probably 12, 13, maybe 14 years of age. It was very common. The Jewish girls were betrothed when they were 12, so Mary probably was 14, maybe, at the oldest.

The Bible often interprets this betrothal as engagement, but it is different than our engagement. If two people got to decide they would like to marry, the parents got involved and they would meet together. And they would begin to negotiate this marriage; they'd settle on a price and it would begin the betrothal period, which was usually about a year. And during that year, Mary would have lived at home; Joseph would've lived at home; but the only way to break a betrothal though was through divorce. So, it's much more binding than our engagement. During that time, there was to be no physical contact between the couple. And finally, they would work their way to the wedding day.

It was in that time period as Joseph was betrothed to Mary, that the Angel Gabriel shows up, and says the most unimaginable thing to a very common, very ordinary young girl in Nazareth, that's recorded in Luke Chapter One. If you have a Bible, turn to Luke Chapter One. Zacharias and Elizabeth were a godly couple. Elizabeth was barren. She had no children, and she was well past childbearing age, when the Angel Gabriel appeared to them and said that they would have a son in their old age, and this son would be the forerunner, the announcer of the Messiah, John the Baptist.

Verse 26 of Luke One opens:

Now in the sixth month, (referring to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy), now, in the sixth month, the Angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, (Luke 1:26)

Again, it's important to remind you when we read those words, for a first century reader, there was a stigma. There was something attached to those words that this was not a place where anybody lived. This was a place where nobody lived, so the most unusual place for the Messiah to come from.

Verse 27:

... to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

We're introduced to the characters: Joseph, a carpenter, a descendant of David - but don't read into that, that he lived as some sort of royalty; he didn't; he was just of the Line of David; he was a very poor carpenter - and Mary, who was a virgin.

Verse 28:

And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was very perplexed at this statement and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. (Vs. 28-29)

When the angel appeared to Mary, Mary became frightened. Mary was troubled. She was troubled, not just because of the presence of the angel, but because specifically what the angel had said to her. So, what did the angel say? The Angel said, "Hail, favored one." Verse 28, that word favored one is a form of the Greek word from which we get our word grace. It literally means that Mary was about to receive grace; unmerited favor; undeserved favor from God. It's a passive verb, which means Mary is the recipient of grace, and grace, by its very definition, is undeserved favor.

In 1854, the Pope declared a doctrine called the Immaculate Conception. It was a belief that Mary was immaculately conceived and because of that she was sinless. But the New Testament doesn't teach that. Grace, by its very definition, is undeserved favor. As a matter of fact, in Verse 47, Mary even says she needs a Savior. But it's also important to realize, that if Mary was sinless, when God came near, He didn't come to the ordinary. He didn't come to the face in the crowd. He came to the perfect. And if that's the case, then we're all in trouble. But that's not the Christmas story.

The Christmas story is that when God came near, he came to the ordinary. He came to those who needed grace. He came to those in need of a Savior. "Hail favored one. The Lord is with you." We're so used to that terminology that it doesn't even hardly surprise us. We talk about the very nature of God dwelling within us. We talk about the very presence of God being in us, but this is still under the old covenant; they didn't think that way at all. The presence of God was in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. They didn't think in terms of the very presence of God being with someone individually. So, this was a radical statement. The very presence of God is with you, and Mary was frightened. She was troubled. She didn't know what to do with this statement.

So, the angel says in Verse 30:

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor ... (That's the same word again. You are a recipient of grace.) You have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. 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." (Vs. 30-33)

That's a mouthful. When Patti was pregnant with our girls, I thought they'd be great. Still do, but the Angel Gabriel is going way beyond that. He's saying they're going to be great. This son will be great. His name will be Jesus. The name means, "The Lord is our salvation." He'll be the

Messiah; He'll be the king that will sit on the throne of His father David. Only, He will reign forever, clearly identifying Him as the Messiah. He will be the King of Kings.

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Arnie: Bryan, our culture tells us we need to make a name for ourselves. You know, we need to be famous. But you said the Christmas story is about another way. For all of us “nobodies”, what's that way about?

Bryan: Yeah, so the Christmas story is full of just the reminder that God's about ordinary people. It's about whosoever chooses to believe, that everyone has an equal chance to be saved and stand right before God. As we've said before, we're all sinners, misfits, and losers, who have been made right only by the power of Jesus. But we have been invited to be a child of the King now and forever. So, to me, the Christmas story is about shepherds, it's about a stable, it's about a manger. It's about a Jesus who came to be the Savior of the world.

Cara: Bryan, I love that line. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It reminds me of where I'm from, of 200 people and a tavern. It seems like the location God cares most about is the location of our hearts.

Bryan: Yeah. So, it's a reminder that God's value system is different than our value system. And the whole story is just not what people think. You know, the Gospels talk about the last shall be first, the weak shall be strong. It's just a completely different value system.

Arnie: Bryan, the angel called Mary “favored one”. Would you say that God gives each of us that title?

Bryan: Yeah. So, Mary uniquely so, because she was about to carry the Christ child, but it means grace- given one. So yeah, that title would be appropriate for all of us. None of us deserve what we've been given. It's a gift.

Cara: So, shepherds were usually treated as second class citizens, but here they are. They're the first people that get the Good News about Jesus, and it arrives by angel-gram. Maybe for the first time in their lives, they are actually treated as though they made a difference. The truth is we all do. And it's important to let others know that.

Bryan: Yeah. So, in God's economy, no matter who you are, God just asks us to be faithful to what He's called us to do. And the rest is up to Him. There's often a significant difference between what we see and what God sees, and God's just inviting us to be obedient.

Arnie: Bryan, talk a little bit more about the presence of God. Why was that such a radical thought 2000 plus years ago?

Bryan: Yeah, so it was radical. For the most part, the Hebrew people thought of God as dwelling in the Holy of Holies, deep within the Temple. They were separated from the presence of God by

multiple layers, with no chance of experiencing intimacy with God. If you just imagine a Jew in the Old Testament, wandering into the Temple all the way into the Holy of Holies, it was unthinkable. So then to understand the concept that you can experience intimacy in the presence of God - Abba, Father, Daddy - to them was unimaginable.

Arnie: How do we best experience God's presence today?

Bryan: So great question. I think it's the Holy Spirit, is the very presence of God within us. Every believer has the presence of the Spirit of God within us. I think it also comes through God's Word and understanding of God's truth. I think it also comes when we're together with God's people. That's a unique presence of God, when the church gathers, and I think it's prayer. It's all of that that defines a relationship, which is intimacy with God.