

How to Surprise an Angel

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, I invite you to open your Bibles to the New Testament section, which is toward the back, to page 53 and 54.

We're going to be jumping back a little bit. I'd like to point out as we begin that last week David Short preached on four verses.

And this week it's 56, no, it's 51, 51 I suppose. So I don't know why I'm pointing that out, but just find it interesting.

A few weeks ago I received a letter from Malawi. Some of you know that Amber and I traveled to Malawi a little over a year ago. And since then I've been able to correspond a little bit with some of the people, some of the lay leaders that I taught.

Really just mainly this one. His name's Peter Masai. And Peter's about 20 years old. He's a lay leader in his parish.

[1 : 06] He's an evangelist. And what that means, I asked Peter what that meant that he actually did, and he said, well, my priest gives me a bullhorn, and he tells me a village to go to, so I cycle out to the village and then I, you know, just let loose, preaching the gospel.

And grapefruit occurs. I'm sure he's a good one. I haven't heard him preach, but I'd like to. In his letters that he sends me, he always covers two themes. The first thing he talks about is what he calls his treasure.

And by that he means his Bible. St. John's provided him with a Bible, and ever since then he's always referring to it. And he'll write to me about some passage that he's confused by or challenged by and asks me for help, which is fun.

And the second theme that he always covers are his songs, because what he does is he'll read a text, study it, and then write a song about it to communicate with his people.

And I love reading these letters. But from my North American perspective, I admit that I find a great incongruity in Peter.

[2 : 22] Because Peter is extremely poor. I expect that his Bible is the most expensive thing he owns. But Peter exudes this joy that is remarkable.

It comes out in his letters. It came out when I spoke with him in person. And from a North American perspective, it just seems incongruous. Well, this morning, our passage carries that same incongruity.

Because we've got Mary, we've got Elizabeth, and even John the Baptist jumps in for the party. And all of these people raise their voices, and John the Baptist kicks away with this extraordinary joy.

I mean, it's exalted. It's glorious. It's some of the most beautiful songs in the entire Bible. And when I come to this passage, I want to know what that singing is all about.

I want to know what that joy is all about. I want to know what makes a poor, pregnant, teenaged girl with no rights in her society, what makes a girl like that sing like Mary does?

[3 : 32] And according to Mary in her song, which is verse 46 and following, she's not singing about her circumstances. She's singing because of who her God is.

She's singing because God has reached down with His strong arm, with His strong, merciful arm, to come and fulfill the promises that were made long before to Israel.

And when God comes with His strong arm, He comes giving a king who exalts the humble and the weak, and lifts them up. And so I want to look at those two reasons why Mary sings.

First of all, God has shown the strength of His arm by fulfilling His promises. Verse 5 gives us something of the context that we need to have in mind.

When Luke pulls back the veil on his narrative, he sets it in a historical frame by referring to Herod, king of Judea. Now, Herod is not a name that evoked a lot of happiness for Israelites in the first

century.

[4 : 44] Herod was a name, a kind of figurehead, of all the disappointment and the pain and the misery of a people who had been scattered, who had been oppressed, and who were powerless, and from a worldly perspective had become helpless and hopeless.

By the first century, the Jewish community, the Israelite community, had a glorious past. Each week in the synagogue, they'd read about their glorious past.

They'd hear all about the promises to Abraham. How God came to Abraham and Sarah and promised them that they would have a family that would bless the world. And they heard all about the promises and the miracles given through Moses.

About how God reached down and grabbed them when they were in Egypt and led them to the promised land through the Red Sea. And they heard about King David, the great King David, and God's promise to him that, which was perhaps the most glorious promise of all, that one day there would be a king from David's line that would rule over Israel forever and would reconcile God and humanity and would put the world right.

They had a wallet full of promises. But by the first century, it looked like those checks wouldn't be cashed.

[6 : 13] Because they had lost their land. They had been scattered out across the Roman Empire and beyond. The worst thing of all is that they didn't have a king.

All they had was this guy, Herod, who was a despised and cruel and wicked puppet of Rome. And it was a long, long way from the king that God had promised.

And at this point, it looked like God's promises were dead. And all of Israel's attempts to rebel against Rome and set up their own king, every time they were crushed and beaten and obliterated. But that was the perfect time from God's perspective. The days when Herod ruled as king in Judea, that was the best time for God to send his angel, Gabriel, to a guy who was serving as priest in the temple to come to Zechariah and Elizabeth and say God's promises aren't dead and they're going to be fulfilled.

Think about Zechariah and Elizabeth for a moment and think about what Old Testament story is echoed in this passage.

[7 : 29] Think about it for a second. Zechariah and Elizabeth are a righteous couple. They have no children and they are past childbearing age.

Now that sounds like a rerun to me. Who does that sound like? Sounds like Abraham. Sounds like Sarah. Abraham and Sarah were righteous before God.

They were barren, unable to have children. And when God's promises came, they were too old to have children even if everything was healthy. But God came to Abraham and Sarah nevertheless and promised them a family and promised that through that family all the nations of the world would be blessed.

And so when we come to the first chapter of Luke, that miracle is repeated. And it's repeated a second time for a good reason. It's a sign.

It's a big, happy, joyful sign that God has not forgotten His promises. That God has not lost His power.

[8 : 37] That He has not left Israel alone. No, the time has come for God to wrap up and fulfill all the promises that were in Israel's glorious past.

God wrote a lot of checks to Israel and the time has come to cash them in. But it has to come through a barren womb. Why? For a good reason.

Because God's promises are never fulfilled by human effort or by human ingenuity or by human resourcefulness reaching up toward God.

God's salvation always comes down by God's effort, by God's power, and by His strong arm and His powerful grace. You see, friends, look at the symmetry here.

Israel was created by God's strong grace when He made a barren old couple have a baby. And now the great news is that Israel is going to be saved by God's strong grace, signaled when an old barren couple have a baby.

[9 : 44] Now, we're trying to figure out why Elizabeth, John the Baptist, and Mary sing so joyfully. And this is part of it. I mean, this is enough.

If the promises of the Old Testament are going to be fulfilled, that's enough to get any Israelite dancing. But it gets better. It gets better because the angel Gabriel moves on and He goes up to

Galilee a few months later to a virgin named Mary.

And what we find out there is it turns out that God's going to fulfill all of His promises when she has a baby. Even though she's a virgin, she's going to have the great King of Israel.

Look at verse 32. This is when the angel is telling Mary who Jesus will be. He says, 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 His kingdom there will be no end. Now, that's just glorious.

[10:56] That God is fulfilling His promises to Israel by giving them the King that they've been hoping and praying and longing for. And the fantastic thing is that this isn't going to be just any old regular King.

This isn't going to be a King like Herod. He's not going to be an Emperor like Caesar in Rome. And His kingdom isn't going to be like Rome.

This King, Jesus, is going to be the Eternal King. But not just that. He's going to be a humble King. Think about this scene for a moment.

Think about the Virgin Mary. I mean, this is the big, big moment. This is the moment that humanity has been waiting for where God enters into our sphere to save us.

The great King's grand entrance. And God chooses to bring forth His Son through an unknown, unimportant virgin teenage girl. that is ridiculous from one perspective.

[12:08] It's ridiculously humble. But it's critically important and it gives us something of the shape of who this King will be and the nature of His kingdom.

Because all through the Gospel of Luke and all through the New Testament, God's saving power is strongest when Jesus is at His most humble moment. He's conceived in a virgin's womb.

He's born in a stable. And later on, 33 years later, He is lifted high. But He's lifted high on a cross for the sin of the world.

You see, Jesus is a different kind of King. He is great and He is powerful but He is humble. And it's critical that you and I grapple with this a little bit because it has huge implications for the nature of the kingdom of God.

It means that Christ's regime is going to be marked, saturated, permeated with humility. That Christ's kingdom will be the most powerful, the most enduring empire of all time but it will also be a kingdom that embraces service and sacrifice and suffering as a means to His victory and His eternal glory.

[13:30] And friends, that's huge. because if that's true, I hope you can see this, if that's true, then all of our notions, all of our expectations about success and status and reward and joy and happiness are turned upside down.

You see, your North American worldview and my North American worldview is shattered by this king.

The proud are thrown down, the powerful and the competent are put down while the weak and the lowly and the humble are raised high.

Friends, that's why Mary sings. And that's why this whole story is so hard for us to comprehend. So let's look at how this plays out in Zechariah and Mary and I'm going to contrast Zechariah and Mary and illustrate how one is brought low and the other is lifted high.

Look at verse 18. This is when the angel Gabriel has come to Zechariah, the priest in the temple and he promises him a son.

[14:52] He actually promises him joy in verse 14. But then verse 18. Look at his response. Zechariah says to the angel, how shall I know this will happen?

For I'm an old man and my wife is advanced in years. And then look over at verse 34. This is at the same moment when the angel speaks to Mary.

The angel tells Mary that she's going to have a son even though she's a virgin and Mary's response is this. Mary said to the angel, how shall this be since I have no husband?

Okay. At first glance it looks like those are the same basic questions that they're asking but they're actually the reverse of each other. Zechariah does not believe the angel.

He won't believe it unless the angel proves it. But Mary's the opposite. Mary's question is how will this occur? Her question assumes that what the angel says is going to happen.

[15:59] She doesn't know how it's going to happen but she assumes it will happen. Zechariah doesn't believe and demands a sign but Mary she doesn't know how but she knows who.

She knows who's speaking to her and more importantly she knows whose word Gabriel represents and so she simply humbly trusts.

May it be to me as you have said and in the eyes of the angel and in the eyes of God that makes all the difference in the world. You see the world exalts the proud and the rich and the powerful but it works differently when God comes because God exalts the humble and the needy and those who trust him.

You see from the world's perspective Zechariah has all the status in this story he's got all the goods he's got all the stuff that a successful guy should have he's a priest he's professionally religious he's morally upright he's fulfilled his duties he has this glorious lineage but at the critical moment he doesn't believe God's word and Mary couldn't be more opposite we don't hear anything of her lineage she comes from a backwater village she's an unmarried woman in that culture she is nothing but in the kingdom of God she's the hero she's the exemplary one she's the one that God exalts and friends that's the way it works in the kingdom of God keep going let's look at Zechariah look at Zechariah now after he doubts and look particularly at his speech he becomes mute he can't speak and interestingly he cannot sing for months but what happens to Mary after she believes well she gets up she runs out to Elizabeth's house who also believed

God's word and Elizabeth Mary and John the Baptist as much as he can burst into this explosion of praise and joy and singing friends when you see the king when you receive the king when you see God's grand and mighty strength bringing salvation and when you see God's gift his extravagant gift particularly in the light of your own profound need the natural response is joy and thanksgiving friends you can't help but start singing and that's why Christians are always a singing people see Mary's joy and her song doesn't come out of her circumstance she's not just singing because she's going to be a mom her motherhood is going to bring her on a path that will have shame and pain for the next 33 years she sings because she's received God's salvation verse 47 my soul my spirit rejoices in God my savior

[19:36] Mary sings for the same reason my friend Peter sings back in Malawi he doesn't sing because of his circumstance he sings because he's got a savior he sings because he's received the king but what about us I mean what about you and me I wonder if we know that kind of joy and my guess is that if we read through Mary's song that was the anthem and it starts in verse 46 if we read through Mary's song some of us read it and go yep yep I know what she's talking about he's my savior too and my guess is that others of us read it and we fall flat and we say I don't get it I don't know what she's talking about and it makes me think if we are weak in joy

I wonder if it's because we are strong in ourselves because you know we're a pretty competent group of people here and I don't say that to puff us up I say it because it's dangerous and I wonder to what extent we've believed this world lie that our joy and our hope and our consolation comes from our wealth and our career and our gadgets and our postal codes and our relationships and friends if that's the case God speaks to us in this in this passage and he tells us to turn he tells us to turn away from ourselves he tells us to turn away from our own confidence in our competence and to turn and receive the king to come without money because it's got to be a gift to come empty and he will fill you to come weeping and he will give you joy and not the joy that rides the waves of the circumstances of our lives but the joy that is durable because it rests on the one whose kingdom will have no end

I mentioned that Peter my friend from Malawi is a great incongruity to me and I realized that the reason is that I bought too much into the lie of North America but when I look at him through the lens of Luke chapter one and the rest of the gospel of Luke when it makes all the sense in the world makes all the sense in the world and it makes me admire him and admire people like Mary and Elizabeth and John the Baptist and it makes me want to be like them and it makes me want us to be like them to come humbly before God trusting in his power alone so that in our weakness his strength will be made perfect to his glory and to our eternal joy let's pray for that father our souls magnify you and our spirit rejoices in you for you are our savior and father we thank you so much that you sent your son we thank you for this king this glorious king and we ask by your spirit that we may receive him receive him in our weakness that we may know his strength give us that gift take away our pride lord bring us low that you may be lifted high and we may know that joy which is a taste of heaven we ask this through that glorious king your son our savior Jesus Christ Amen would you kneel or remain seated as we pray lord we're here this morning rejoicing rejoicing at the beginning of another week and rejoicing especially because we are in your presence recognizing

though that sometimes your plans are inconvenient for us we think we know what's best for us for our situations but like mary and like zechariah we're often surprised by your approach help us father to rejoice as mary did our souls magnifying you we're so unworthy of your attention in ourselves but clothed in a spirit of humility and in the righteousness of your son our savior jesus christ you recognize us as your children and exalt us help us to appreciate all that that means and to thank you lord in your mercy hear our prayer as we

look ahead outside of our church to the federal election make us aware of those candidates who are best suited to lead the country to lead it in a godly way and one that will honor you for the leaders of our church we pray for Archbishop venerables bishops don and malcolm those on our staff and the staff of the anic who are committed to you and to the spread of your gospel for those and churches who have been displaced by the actions of bishop michael we pray and may they see your hand as everything unfolds give the legal teams the wisdom and direction that they need and for the trustees of the affected acinw churches we pray as we do for our own trustees for christine for christine for david for michael and for david give them strength to face the decisions that they must make and give them wisdom in their discussions and deliberations lord in your mercy hear our prayer for those in our church who minister locally we ask your blessing we think of paul and dan and fran of marion and richie and for those also who minister overseas of sharon tom and dan alan and eileen and heather and for those who minister within saint john's for the youth may they each continue to grow closer to you and for those who are teaching sunday school those who lead home bible studies and those who minister in quiet ways around the church facility give each the assurance that their ministry is appreciated and for our pastoral staff we pray for strength as they continue in their ministries and may they feel their strength increase as they continue to rely on you for guidance and help us all to support them in prayer and to encourage them lord in your mercy hear our prayer for our world we pray for those areas that are in crisis we pray for political stability in the middle east and in africa ask that you would ensure that aid goes where it is needed we ask for a smooth distribution of aid as it goes into the areas of the u.s. that are affected by hurricanes right now keep safe family and friends of those who we know who are in those affected areas we think especially of bill and leslie lovell for those in our church who are sick we pray we think of rowena of marguerite fiona janet johanna we ask for guidance and a positive decision in meran's case we think of our troops in afghanistan especially of christopher and bradley and for those that we know in our own hearts who are not necessarily part of saint john's but are part of our circle and as such part of our christian experience we take a moment to pray for them we thank you also lord for those who have a ministry of caring for those who are sick and hurting and for those who minister regularly in prayer for the upcoming prayer conference we

ask that your spirit will be in control of all that happens and may all who attend be blessed and encouraged in their ministry whether in public prayers or in specific one-to-one ministries be with bishop malcolm and may he be prepared in his heart that we may hear from you through him as he speaks and shares with us lord in your mercy hear our prayer and finally as the apostle john wrote this is the confidence we have in approaching god that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us and if we know that he hears us whatever we ask we know that we have what we ask of him amen we are and they and then they see you and they see you