

Advent 2 - You have found favour with God.

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[0 : 00] Okay, so last week John was talking about the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. So we're going to move on to the next bit of the story.

In mine it says, the birth of Jesus foretold. Sometimes it's called the Annunciation. So I'm reading from Luke chapter 1 and beginning at verse 26.

In the sixth month, 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. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favour with God.

[1 : 13] You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great, and we'll be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob 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 upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. 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 barren is in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible with God.

I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said. And then the angel left her. So, great passage.

[2 : 31] Very familiar, I'm sure, to most, if not all of us, and probably will hear it several times this Christmas and Advent season, and we'll hear it again next year, and we've probably all heard it last year.

But it's a passage that still bears revisiting and just slowing down and focusing on. Sort of heading for this sermon is, You have found favour with God.

Those were the words that Gabriel used to address Mary. The first, apart from saying hello, the first thing he said to us, You are highly favoured. You have found favour with God, depending on which version you read it in.

Just put yourself in Mary's sandals for a moment. Imagine how that would make you feel. If God is saying, You have found favour with me, how does that make us feel?

Wonderful. Wonderful, yeah. Might make us feel wonderful, might make us feel a bit nervous. Sometimes we might feel, Well, I don't deserve God's favour, because we missed the point.

[3 : 39] But it's a good question to ask ourselves, How does that make us feel? So, I'm going to pull out a few things from this passage, but they're all going to come under that sort of heading of, you've found favour with God, and how God expresses his favour to us.

So, the first thing that struck me from this passage, was there is a real reassurance for us, in remembering that God is the God who sees.

God who sees our circumstances, who sees how we live, who sees the things that are going on around us. If you remember, back in Genesis, when Hagar had had Abraham's child, and then got sent off into the desert, because Sarah had had enough of her, and God met with her, and Hagar said, I've met with a God who sees me.

God sees us, God sees our circumstances. He sees all the things that we have, have hassle about in our lives, that we think, we can't really bother anybody else with, because they're not that significant, or we don't want to talk about them, but God sees the stuff that's going on in our lives.

He sees our circumstances. And I love that reminder, that although Mary grew up in this tiny village, in the north of first century Palestine, God knew her, God saw her, God saw her circumstances, he saw her heart.

[5 : 05] And there's also a reminder there, that obscurity is no barrier to God's purposes. God could have picked, you know, a princess in the royal household, to carry his son, but he didn't.

He could have picked, you know, the wife of an eminent rabbi, but he didn't. He picked a young girl, who grew up in obscurity, and nobody would ever have heard of, if it hadn't been for this remarkable incident.

You think in the Old Testament, you hear about Samuel, anointing King David, and looking at all Jesse's other sons, and going, well, he looks like a good bloke, and he's tall and strong, and he looks like a king.

And God's saying, no, no, I know what his heart's like. And going down all the sons in order, till he got to the youngest, who they thought was so insignificant, he hadn't even been invited, to this important occasion.

He was out in the field, looking after the sheep. But God, knew that David, was a man after his heart. Our human nature, is often to put the cleverest, or the most important, or the most good looking people, on pedestals.

[6 : 11] You know, if anybody goes on Instagram, which I try not to on the whole, but you know, it's full of airbrushed photographs, of beautiful people. And we put people on pedestals, and then assume that God does the same, but he doesn't.

God knows, those who serve him faithfully. He knows those who've got a heart, to do his will. And he picks people, in obscurity, and he uses them, for his purposes.

I like the reminder as well, that God also knows, those who serve him faithfully. Not that he's sort of, sitting up there, wagging a finger, but often we can be tempted, to seek approval, or affirmation from others.

We might feel that the things we do, for God and for those around us, don't get noticed. But God knows, God sees, God approves it, when we seek to bless, to honour him, and to be obedient to him.

And he knew Mary's heart. He knew that she was a woman of faith. And the same for us. So when we feel like, you know, I've been working really hard for you, God, and I've tried to do the thing, and nobody's taking any notice, God sees, and God is delighted.

[7 : 23] And it's really important for us, to hold on to that. I also like the reminder, in this passage, of God's perfect plan.

If you read Ephesians 1, which is a great chapter, to spend time in, if you're wondering what to read. But it talks about God's purposes, from before creation.

This wasn't a sudden whim of God. We know that the birth of Jesus, had been prophesied, throughout Israelite history. And Ephesians 1 talks about God's purposes, in Christ, from before creation.

He says, he chose us in him, before the creation of the world. God had purposed this, incident in time, before the creation of the world, because he wanted us, to be adopted into his family.

He wanted us, to have that redemption. I'm not going to read, all that passage now, but it's a fantastic passage, talking about what God did for us, in Jesus, and the fact that, this was all part of his purpose, but also his pleasure, to bring us into his family.

[8 : 32] And so reading this, story about, the Annunciation, reminds us, of God's purposes, throughout creation, and even before creation, began, that he purposed, to bring us, into his family.

And Mary, this obscure young girl, was part of that plan, and each of us, are part of that plan too. And God has purposes, for us. So I suppose, there's a bit of challenge, in there as well, in that, you know, how does, we let that speak to us.

Do we see things, the same way, that God does? My guess is, for most of us, a lot of the time, we don't. Not just because, we're not omniscient, but also because, we get so easily distracted, or we get fed up, or we get bored, or we're feeling grumpy, or whatever, and we forget to look at things, from God's perspective.

Do we, sort of chase after, the next big thing, and we hear about, things happening here, and there, in the Christian world, and a lot of those, are good things, but sometimes, we can be so tempted, to chase after, this speaker, because they're really powerful, you know, speak really powerfully, or this, worship band, because they write some great songs, and we get, sort of, focused in on the wrong things, and sometimes, we need to pause, and wait to see, what God is doing.

Do we make assumptions, about the kind of people, that God will use? You know, I guess that most of us, sometimes, if we're honest, have said, I'm not sure God can use me, because, da, da, da, da, da, and we forget, that it's God, that does the anointing, God, that does the equipping, and we look at ourselves, and not at God.

[10 : 11] So, there's a real reminder there, just to wait, to see what God is doing, and to try and see things, from his perspective, ask him to show us, the things he is doing, and look for the small things, as well as the big things.

So, the second thing, I want to focus on, is this idea of, you've, when the angel says to Mary, you've found favour, with God, you are highly favoured, and he repeats it, when, Mary's a bit, anxious about what's going on, he says, you know, you've found favour, with God, and, and, it's, sorry, as I said, it's the first thing, that the angel states, is Mary, Mary's highly favoured, God is with her, and Mary responds, to the angel's information, you're going to have a baby, she says, she responds by asking, how this will happen, now, Zechariah, I think, heard about last week, asked questions too, but he asked it, out of a sense of unbelief, but the sense, with Mary here, is very much, it's a practical thing, without wishing, to be indelicate, Mary obviously knew, where babies came from, and knew that, the necessary, hadn't happened, for her to conceive a child, so she wants to know, you know, how's this going to happen, but she chooses then, to surrender that, to God's will, but it might seem, a funny sort of favour, you know, hello Mary, you're going to have a baby,

Joseph's not the father, people are going to talk, and Mary might have, felt a bit grieved by that, or anxious about it, but she doesn't, but what does favour, mean here, what does it mean, for us to, experience God's favour, it's the idea, of grace, a gift, from God, to Mary, and actually, in this instance, not just from God, to Mary, but from God, to humankind, a special honour, the root, I've had a look, at all the roots, of the words, I'm not as, up on Greek, and all that, there's some people here, but basically, this favour, the root of the word, is charis, have I pronounced that, correctly Andy, yep, charis, or charis, from which, we get our word charity, but it's about, a special gift of God, a special honour, and Mary's response, to this, is one, of obedience, and surrender, in the same way, as David, in the Old Testament, might have felt, a bit anxious, because he got chased, around the desert, by Saul, for quite a long time, because he'd had, this special anointing, from God, so God's favour, doesn't always mean, that everything is going, to be absolutely easy, and rosy, but it means, that we are part, of his purposes, so I had a look, at where else, this word comes, in scripture, lots of examples,

I'm not going to, list them all, but particularly, I noticed in Acts, chapter four, in the early church, and it talks about, them all being together, and the apostles, testifying to the resurrection, and it says, God's grace, was powerfully, at work in them all, but it's that same, root of charis, God's favour, I think in some versions, it actually says, God's favour was upon them, John 1, 16, another passage, that we'll probably hear, lots of this year, talks about, from his abundance, that's God's abundance, we've all received, one gracious blessing, after another, some versions, use the phrase, grace upon grace, which I really like, but it's that same root, it's that sense of, God's favour, God's grace, God's blessing, and I particularly like, the reference in John, because it talks about, we've all received, it's not just, well I'm going to bless John, because he's the pastor, you know, and Andy, because he's an elder, and Josh, because he serves so faithfully, every week, doing the PA, no, it's we have all received, grace upon grace, it's about God's generosity,

God's goodness, not about, us earning his favour, we can make the mistake, sometimes of thinking, God plays favourites, you know, and look at how he's blessed, this person, you know, he must really like them, but he doesn't like me, rubbish, okay, you know, that thing when you're kids, if you've grown up with, siblings, you know, and you sometimes think, I'm sure my mum and dad, like my older brother, better than me, or my younger sister, better than me, and we can get really stuck in that, God doesn't play favourites, in that sense, we might see people being, especially used by him, because he's called them, and he's equipped them, anointed them, but that doesn't mean, he thinks less of you, or of me, so God's favour, is not restricted, devoted to Mary, it's available for us, God's, and you know, the fact that we're here, in this building, is an example of God's favour, Michelle shared, an answered prayer, you know, that's an example, of God's favour,

[15 : 32] God's grace, God's blessing, we've all received, grace upon grace, and it's good to remember, before we get excited, about the presence, under the tree, or wherever, in your stocking, or wherever, that God, has already given us, so much more, so when we're receiving, from one another, this Christmas, let's remember, we are receiving from God, we're receiving his favour, his grace, his blessings, the last thing, I want to look at, in this passage, is probably a little bit, more of a challenge, and I've, entitled this bit, God's way, not my way, because it's very nice, receiving God's favour, isn't it, but, we have a relationship, with God, and relationship, it's a two-way thing, while we acknowledge, that we can never, give back to him, even one iota, of all he's given us, we have a relationship, with God, so what can we learn, from this passage, first of all, can I just remind you, to take comfort, and encouragement, from the knowledge, that God sees us, as we mentioned earlier,

I love Psalm 139, which talks about, you know, even if I go, to the end of the earth, I'll settle on the far side, of the sea, even then, you're with me, your right hand, will hold me, God is with us, God sees us, we might sometimes, feel neglected, or forgotten, or passed over, but God is there, God is with us, God sees us, and knows us, the next thing, we can take, from this passage, a little phrase, that comes up a lot, in the Christmas story, I think Andy's, mentioned it before, do not be afraid, you know, and as Andy said, you know, why would you be afraid, when this angel arrives, happens every day, but it's a reminder here, not to be afraid, Isaiah 41, we often quote, Isaiah 41, 10 which talks about, do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God, but if you go further down, that passage, verse 13, it actually says, for I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold, of your right hand, and says to you, do not fear,

I will help you, and I love that image, of God taking hold, of my hand, just like, you take the hand, of a small child, our granddaughter, isn't quite old enough, to be toddling around yet, but I am looking forward, to you know, holding a hand, and walking around with her, when she is a bit bigger, but God, does the same thing, he reaches out to us, so we don't need, to be afraid, because he is with us, as Gabriel said to Mary, it's understandable, that she was frightened, or she was troubled, as it says in some passages, but we don't need, to be afraid, because God is with us, we need to remember, God is a God, the impossible, Gabriel basically says, it's all right, nothing's impossible, with God, and it's a phrase, that we often trot out, but sometimes, find it harder, to believe, one version, of this passage, uses the phrase, no word, from the Lord, will ever fail, and I love that, when God speaks to us, we can rely on that, he doesn't change his mind, five minutes later, or forget about us, like we do in our humanity, but there's a challenge there, when it says, nothing is impossible with God, how easy do we find that, to believe, if we're facing, a really difficult situation, that can feel, quite hard to believe, and there's a real choice there, about trusting God, and it's okay to say to God,

God, I know that your word says, that nothing's impossible with you, but I'm really struggling, with that here, it's okay to be honest, with God about that, but we need to come to him, with that, and say help me, to trust you, help me not to be afraid, help me to believe, that you are the God, of the impossible, and that your word, will never fail, there's also a reminder, in that, you know the fact, that no word from the Lord, will ever fail, if God's given you a word, that something will come to pass, or he's going to use you, in a certain way, and it feels like, nothing's really happening, wait for God's timing, his word will never fail, so this is where, the real sticking point, may come for some of us, we need to choose to accept, as Mary did, that God's way is best, now I'm sure, if I'd been in Mary's, situation, in that era, and somebody said, oh you're going to have a baby, it's alright, your person you're engaged to, it's not the father, but you're going to have this baby,

I'd have had quite a lot more questions, than Mary did, particularly once I'd sat down, and thought about it for a bit, you know, why can't we wait till we're married, all sorts of things, but Mary, apart from, you know, the practicalities of, not quite sure, how this is going to happen, doesn't do any of that, she chooses, to surrender to God, she chooses, to acknowledge, that God's way, is best, Isaiah 55, talks about, my ways, are not your ways, my thoughts, are not your thoughts, but it's easy, to project our thoughts, and our ways onto God, isn't it, and assume that he thinks, the same as we do, rather than we ought to, align our thinking with his, Mary chose, to surrender, to God's plans, to say, yes, let it be to me, according to your will, or to your word, depending which version you read, do we similarly choose, to surrender to God's will, even when it contradicts, our own plans, and, or, makes completely no sense, you know, like Noah being asked, to build an ark, you know, why have I got to bring, build, you know, okay,

[21 : 39] God said to Noah, yeah, I'm going to bring a flood, on the earth, but there's no, no evidence, of that flood happening, until Noah, had actually, built the ark, and brought the animals inside, you know, as I, Elijah, on Mount Carmel, and saying, you know, God saying, you know, build an altar, place the bull on the altar, I'm going to bring down fire, but Elijah, might have said, well that makes no sense, you know, how's this fire going to be lit, but he didn't, he trusted God, but God often asks us, to make things, that seem to make no sense, at the time, and sometimes, they don't even make sense, after the event, because we might not see, the end result, until we're actually, in heaven with God, but so do we choose, to surrender, to God's will, and that's, not a one time, act by the way, okay, we accept Jesus, when we come to faith, but it's an ongoing, attitude then, of choosing, to surrender, to God's will, choosing to accept, that his way, is the best way, even when, we might have, other views on it,

I think it's important, to knowledge, that we can't, earn God's favour, in the sense, that we can't, you know, we can't work very hard, and therefore, he'll think better of us, as we often, often might act, in that sense, we can't, earn God's favour, he has already, blessed us, as that passage, in Ephesians says, with every blessing, in Christ, he is obviously, we are already, the objects, of his favour, and affection, however, I think we can, position ourselves, to be open, to that favour, moving in our lives, by living surrendered lives, okay, if God says, you know, I want to bless you, by doing this, and this, and you sit in a call, and so on, not having that, then actually, we're not receiving, as much as that blessing, it's a bit like, on Christmas, but in fact, I'll go back, to my son's birthday, when he was about two, I think he was, his second birthday, and as kids that age do, they just, he just got overwhelmed, by all the presents, and the excitement, and we weren't, to see my parents, and they got this present, for him all wrapped up, and he just wasn't interested, he was just overwhelmed, but sometimes, we can do that, with the things that God has, for us as well, we can feel overwhelmed, or we can feel sulky, because we wanted the gift, that somebody else has got, so we need to, position ourselves, to receive that favour, by being surrendered, to his will, and reminding ourselves, of previous blessings, and understanding, that we belong to him, and remembering, that we are, the objects, of his favourite affection, should help us, to make those good choices, so giving that, you know, it's great that Michelle said, you know, we prayed about this, and we've had an answer, to prayer already, you know, 20 minutes,

I love that, you know, we pray, and the answer comes like that, doesn't always happen like that, but isn't it nice, when it does, but remembering, remembering answered prayer, remembering blessings, makes it easier actually, than to trust God, the next time, or on an ongoing basis, okay, so I'd like to give you, a little bit of homework, if you're up for homework, and you want to change, from the Christmas films, on the telly, and eating too many, mince pies, and, first of all, just take time, to think about that phrase, you found favour with God, not just in terms, of applying to Mary, but in terms, of applying to us, I asked at the start, of the sermon, how does that make you feel, I'm not going to ask you again, but it's a good question, to sit with, you know, and if it makes me feel, a bit awkward, why is that, what do I need to do, about that, you know, do I need to, spend more time, focusing on those verses, that talk about God, blessing me, and loving me, but also, in this Advent season,

