

# Finding the Gift of God's Favor (Mary)

Series: Finding the True Gift of Christmas

Brad Bailey – Dec. 24, 2023

Intro

**Tonight... we join millions and millions of lives around this planet... engaging the birth of Christ. [1]**

It is my **favorite gathering of the year...** because it **still fills me with the wonder** of engaging how the **source of all creation has come among us in the most profound way.**

**Wherever you find yourself tonight... my hope is that Christmas draws you with wonder... stirs in you a longing** for something beyond what is... a sense of there being more... **more than we see.**

And as always...it **comes with the challenge** of sifting through **all that has become associated with the cultural Christmas holiday.**

This challenge was captured in **the CHARLIE BROWN Christmas special. [2]**

**As many know... Charlie Brown and the Peanuts gang, that includes Snoopy, was created by Charles Shultz.**

**A Charlie Brown Christmas first aired in December 1965, becoming only the second animated Christmas special shown on American television. Its predecessor, just one year before (1964) was Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. In almost every respect, A Charlie Brown Christmas was a sharp contrast to the Rudolph special. Rudolph was glossy and commercial, with well-known adult actors voices, brightly colored stop-motion animation, a laugh track, and a comfortably secular story.**

**In contrast, Shultz's Charlie Brown Christmas was all about the challenge of finding the real meaning of Christmas. In the opening lines, a sullen Charlie Brown shares his complicated feelings about the "most wonderful time of the year": "I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I'm still not happy." To help him, Charlie Brown is tasked with bringing together a presentation about Christmas...and along the way they get a tree... Charlie Brown and his friend Linus find the tree lot...full of bright shiny trees...but Charlie Brown sees one tiny little tree...and chooses it... because he says...it needs him...and when the others see it...they laugh... and when he realizes that the whole attempt at the show wasn't coming together.... He finally shouts out: "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"**

**And just then... Linus says very confidently that he knows what it's all about... walks to the center of the stage and recites Luke's account of Christ's birth. (And then says: "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.")**

**> And with that... everything changes... something is found that they could never find in all the cultural and commercial signs and symbols.**

And with that... **Charles Shultz... the creator of Charlie Brown... spoke a profound truth that can serve us all.**

The challenge of our current celebration of Christmas is to realize that **if we look for Christmas in the secondary symbols and sentiments as an end in themselves... we will never find Christmas.**

Charlie Brown reminds us that when our current culture tells us to find the **perfect Christmas**... defined by the **perfect family**... in the **perfect home**... exchanging the **perfect gifts**... Christmas **will elude us**.

> The great news...is that **when we engage the actual events** at the root of Christmas... what we **find are real lives like ours**... **discovering that which changes their lives forever**... not because of anything perfect in them or around them.

**So we too will listen to the Gospel of Luke... and look at the earthly mother of Jesus... ... to find the true gift of Christmas.**

**As we've looked at through the recent weeks... when we engage the actual events** at the root of **Christmas**... what we find is that no one is there because they achieved some great purpose... rather they found purpose because of the life they came into relationship with. The child at the center.

### **Luke 1:26-29**

**God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.**

These words are written by Luke... a doctor who explains that he has sought to give a proper account of all that took place. He had traveled with the disciples and would have written from the direct accounts of Mary herself...as well as others. This is the testimony of the Scriptures.

It is **not some fairy tale** rooted in some other world. The writers describe **every ruler**...and **date**...and the **conflict with customs and laws**. It's all there.

**He is giving an account of real people in the real world.**

Here we are **introduced to Mary**. [3]

We know she was a **young woman**... quite young for marriage and motherhood compared to our western urban culture... but the **common age for rural cultures**.

They didn't lack childhoods... they just didn't have many years of school...so one transitioned to the responsibilities of adulthood sooner.

She's **as human as you and I** ... and quite notably...she **was pledged to be married**... **she had plans for marriage** and a **family of her own**. **Her big day is coming soon when she will be celebrated.**

**Until a messenger from God greets her with news...that God is with her.** And we may hear that comforting news.

But as we read...

**<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.**

Mary is so often **perceived and cast in images** as being in a **state of tranquility**... with a **static serenity**. But told she was **troubled...afraid**.

**It probably shouldn't be surprising.**

**Encounters with angelic figures** were rare and in every case **described as initially frightening**.

Imagine the presence of **one who represents God**... the source of all creation... engaging a **14- to 16 year-old girl**. [4]

Something outside her understanding ...an angel... came ...and spoke of God's favor. Her reaction is to wonder what exactly it means that she's been "favored," and that God is with her. She fears... what she will hear next.... What it means.

**We all may wonder: What does it mean if God enters our world?  
There is a fear that runs deep in us all.**

We all wonder...

**Would we simply be faced with what we deserve?** That may not be a positive outlook.

**Since God would know everything about us... could God actually love us? Value us? Want us?**

(From my experience...when someone says they don't care what anyone thinks about them... they care a lot about what others think. We all fear being rejected.... and alone)

**Luke 1:30-32**

**But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.**

**"Don't be afraid...you have found favor with God."**

**> Those are the words that capture what Christmas bears.**

**1. In Christmas our fear is met by God's favor.**

There is favor that can be found beyond our fear.

Many have presumed she is favored because there is something special about her.

But there is nothing that is ever said or suggested that Mary was special... apart from her receptiveness. [5]

**It is a favor extended to all who will receive him. [6]**

**And the favor lies in the child who is now coming.**

**The angel says: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." (Luke 1:32)**

Mary grasps that God's favor comes with the presence of God in the one who will be born.

*Mary doesn't say, "I'm the first virgin ever to get pregnant. I really need to work the public relations out of this. We can get figurines sold. We can name football passes after me. Why we can even wind up with people seeing my face in toast." She doesn't do that. What does she do? She humbles herself down before the Lord, she recognizes and knows that **her name, her glory is found only in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.***

**Now there are some of us who are working really, really hard for our name. We may be working really, really hard for our glory. It might be our glory in the family. It might be in our career.**

*What Mary sees and recognizes is that when Jesus is coming the only thing that is significant for her glory is her relationship with Jesus.*

**There is freedom when we find God's favor through the way that Christ has come to us... rather than trying to prove we deserve favor.**

When you look at the nativity scene... no one is there because they were special...no one is there because they achieved some great purpose in themselves....they are there because of their relationship to the child at the center of the scene... their relationship to the one who was born.

He is the true center of everything... and to be in relationship to him is the most valuable favor we could ever have. That he comes to us...and wants us to be united with him...is the most valuable gift we could ever receive.

Lot to take in...and Mary responds with a question.

**Luke 1:34**

**“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”**

Sometimes as modern people we assume that these were simple minded people... who didn't know much about how things worked. They **may not have studied modern biology**, but they **knows what's involved with creating life**.

Mary knew where children came from. She asks the same question any modern life would: How is this possible?

**Her doubt is not a rejection of God's plan** but rather a **human attempt to understand the divine**.

**Luke 1:35-37**

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.”

**God declares that his Spirit has brought this life to bear within Mary.**

This **shouldn't be surprising**... for we know that the **whole material as we know it** is bound by time and space.

**Modern physics points to a source that must exist outside time and space.**

And long the Scriptures described how the **Spirit of God was the force behind creation itself**.

There may be a **current trend** to believe that **only what is material is real**.

The Bible warns us that **humanity would become enamored with it's own understanding**. We appear to have **fallen in love with the shadow**...thinking it was real... that the **material world is primary** and any other reality is only secondary.

**The Bible** reflects a different reality...one in which the **spiritual transcends the physical**.

“...because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

In those words... **God reclaims life is His to create... and to control.**

## **2. In Christmas we find a larger reality.**

***“The actual event at the root of Christmas draws us in wonder...like one who stares with wonder into the sky. What we see are just the faint glimpses of what is far beyond us, not of a lesser reality, but a larger reality.”***

And God lets Mary know that such a supernatural working has preceded her... and points to what he had done to prepare the way through **her cousin Elizabeth. God was going to raise up a prophet to prepare the way for Jesus as the Messiah. And this he had done by allowing her cousin Elizabeth ...who was long unable to conceive and now in older age with her husband Zechariah... to conceive.**

And concludes....

**Luke 1:37**

**For no word from God will ever fail.**

This speaks of how all this had been foretold.

There are markers of such transcendence.

And this is affirmed to Joseph. He doesn't seem to believe what Mary has told him. And we are told...

**Matthew 1:20-23**

**But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”**

**<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).**

**“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet...”**

Those are powerful words. Joseph was confused. He assumed this couldn't be the work of God. It didn't fit. Many of us can wonder the same.

> But then someone says LOOK... Look at what God said he was going to do.

## **3. In Christmas we see what God had long foretold.**

**Some may say this is a myth... that grew over time.**

But here we are reminded.... **It is quite the contrary...** the belief that God had come in the flesh to be with us... **didn't develop after the birth of Christ...** it is **rooted in the indisputable history** of the prophets that had already been well known. **Seven hundred years before** the birth of Jesus, the Lord promised, Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

**God keeps His promises. [7]**

And **God makes clear why...**

**Matthew 1:21**

**... you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”**

**4. In Christmas we see God rescuing us from ourselves.**

Some may find the idea of being saved from our sin **offensive**.

**We may think other people may need to be saved from their sins...but we don't think the concept of sin is something that is common within all of us.**

But to be sinners does not simply mean we are bad people in contrast to good people... it **means we are lost**...we have **chosen to live separated from our true source and identity**. We have **gone astray**.

> That is what we need to be saved from.

**When we go our own way... we are existing outside the true orbit of life**. We have **tried to become our own orbit... living in relationship to the wrong gravitational pull**.

**The consequences is separation from life.**

Jesus has come to rescue us... to save us from ourselves. [8]

**4. In Christmas we see God rescuing us from ourselves.**

*As someone described...*

**God is not against us for our sin.**

**God is for us against our sin.**

God is **for us**. He **wants us**. And that is what becomes so clear with the final point of what Christ brings...

**5. In Christmas God has come to us.**

**He tells Joseph...you are to give him the name Jesus...but also that “they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).**

**God with us.**

**Think of it: The source of all power...all creation... all that is good... becoming embodied in our world.**

One who bears God's very nature becoming completely **dependent upon the man and woman he made to now take care of him**.

Choosing to be the child of peasants. All **power lying amid the poverty**... the **highest authority** in the **humblest of positions**.

**Luke 2:19**

**Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.**

**There she was...out in the animal stalls... but with God there with her** in the presence of Jesus.

There she was...**with only shepherds**...those deemed the least welcome in the social circles of her day... being told they are those who can find God...embodied in this child.  
And when he dies and rose... and sent his Spirit... she knew his presence was with her... his kingdom was truly not of this earth.

**Mary life was changed forever.**

**She understood that God was with her... no matter what was going on around her.**

**This is so important**...because we live in a world in which we **presume that favor** is related to our **circumstances**.....to **how well things are going**.

**We tend to assume** that such favor meant that she would be **blessed by a smooth life**.

But **her life would be filled with challenging circumstances**.... her honor in the village...gone. The help of her family....gone.

She would give birth amidst animals... a paranoid king would hunt for her child...she would have to flee to Egypt.

**Christmas is the gift that changes how you understand your whole life.**

It's not about what your house looks like... or even who surrounds you... it's about who God being with you... at the center.

**God wants us to know something.** The truth is that there's **never been the "perfect Christmas" by sentimental standards.** There's **never been a peaceful Christmas** as defined by the **circumstances that people were in.**

**Like Mary... we need to take this in.**

**Tonight the creator of universe wants you to know... he hasn't forgotten you.**

**When Charles Shultz wrote** a Charlie Brown Christmas... **he knew we may be like that Charlie Brown Christmas tree...left in the corner of the lot... and not all the bulbs may be working.**

**But we are wanted... and just like that little tree God sees us... and has favor on the imperfect.**

He's come to us. He has come FOR us.

Tonight is a night that many may be thinking of the gift they will give.

**There is no gift will mean more... last longer...than the gift of His offer of receiving God's favor.**

## **PRAYER**

### **Resources:**

Likely drew thought from various resources through the years. And this year including: Girl Interrupted: The Unmistakable Strength of Mary - Tracey Bianchi - [here](#)

### **Notes:**

1. At this time, it is estimated that 2.4 billion people hold Christian beliefs...which is 31% of the world's population.

2. Peanuts was a syndicated daily and Sunday American comic strip written and illustrated by Charles M. Schulz. The strip's original run extended from 1950 to 2000. By 2000 Peanuts was running in more than 2,500 newspapers in 75 countries. Charles Shultz would later explain he wanted to avoid that consumerist promises of manufactured, faux-heavenly Christmas cheer so prevalent in other Christmas specials and advertisements because they left an emptiness in the human heart. It has been noted, that just as Charlie Brown and his little Christmas tree are misunderstood, mocked, and rejected, so was the Savior of the world—a Savior who came to save the very people who rejected him. The song many associate now with Christmas was entitled "Linus and Lucy" ...originally featured on Jazz Impressions of A Boy Named Charlie Brown (1964) and was also released as the B-side for the single "Oh, Good Grief". However, it gained its greatest exposure as part of the Charlie Brown Christmas soundtrack the following year..

For more, see: 'A Charlie Brown Christmas' Evokes the Sacred Worth of Underdogs: Charles Schulz's improbable holiday special echoed his own acquaintance with lowliness. - MARY MCCAMPBELL|DECEMBER 19, 2023 - [here](#)

3. She was probably born in what we would refer to as the year 20BC....but she wouldn't have called it that ... because this child would change the whole of history...and create that very system by which we date human history.

The gospels mention various festal pilgrimages to which Jesus journeyed, a custom he learned from his parents (cf. Lk 2:41). From this evidence, scholars calculate that his public ministry probably lasted around three years placing his death around age thirty-three, with Mary around forty-eight at that time (i.e. 27-29 AD). Though these are estimates, we can safely assume that Jesus died before 37 A.D., when scholars inform us that Pilate left office in the Holy Land.

4. It has also been noted that it was also uncommon for a woman to be engaged his way in public.

According to Jewish tradition, men were discouraged from talking to women in public: Mishnah [Pirkei Avot 1:5](#)

5. Elizabeth says "The baby in my womb started jumping up and down when I saw you." She says to her, "Mary, you are blessed. You are highly favored among women." But Mary's response is to begin to sing out...and the words declare that God has come to her as one who is in need,,,as a sign that he has come to all.

As Russell Moore notes,

*Notice in this song she starts singing about a God whose mercy is for those who fear him, a God who is doing all of these things for his people, forgiving the sins of his people. He's not turning away from them. He's going to hear them. She sings about the blessing of the glory that God is giving. She says, "From now on all generations will call me blessed." God is honoring her name. He is glorifying her. Mary doesn't say, "I'm the first virgin ever to get pregnant. I really need to make a lot of public relations out of this. We can get figurines sold. We can name football passes after me. Why we can even wind up with people seeing my face in toast." She doesn't do that. What does she do? She humbles herself down before the Lord, she recognizes and knows that her name, her glory is found only in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. - The Most Shocking Madonna Song Ever by Russell Moore ([here](#))*



6. Such favor was not exclusive to Mary. When the angel announces the birth of Christ to the shepherds, they declare: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:14)

As noted [here](#) such favor is akin to what is extended to all who receive Christ according to Ephesians 1:6 – "to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

(a) Grace, which He freely bestowed. A literal translation would be, "His grace, with which he has graced us." Here we find grace as both a noun (*charis*) and a verb (*charitoō*). Out of the riches of the Father's grace, God has graced you. The verb is the same one the angel uses when he says to Mary, "You are highly favored" ([Luke 1:28](#)). So are you.

In some Bibles this passage is translated as "He made us accepted". God accepted you into his family not because of anything you have done but on account of his grace. Your Father's acceptance is not something you ever need strive for; you already have it.

(b) In the Beloved. If you want to know how acceptable you are to God, you only have to look at his Beloved Son.

7. God had foretold his plans...including that of Mary.

The plan for the incarnation actually began long ago. In the Book of Genesis...the oldest of the Biblical testimony... we are given a poetic summary of how human existence began. It describes a great separation... rooted in believing we could be like God.

Immediately God speaks of to the serpent... the source of the deception and destruction... and speaks of a time that will come...

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15)

And into human history... God called out a people...and among those people prophets... who declared that one was coming. Here we read:

"The LORD himself will give you a sign. Watch! The virgin is conceiving a child, and will give birth to a son, and his name will be called Immanuel." – Isaiah 7:14 (ISV)

And many other elements that are associated with the expectations of the Messiah are given, including where he would be born, his rejection, his death, his then being raised up.

8. He has come to lead us into life with God.

This can help a nation become better.

That may lead to a more successful life

That may lead into a more whole life.

That may lead to restoring our family.

But at the very root...lies our need to be saved from our state of defiant independence.