Luke 1:26-55 *Legendary 2: Mary: Favored By God*

***Brackets and Bible Characters***

One of the things we lost when the pandemic shut everything down was the NCAA basketball tournament. I had sort of mixed feelings on that. On the one hand, UNI probably wasn’t getting in, even though they had one of their best seasons in recent memory, so cancelling the tourney spared me the pain of not hearing their name called. But, on the other hand, March Madness is my favorite sporting event of the year, and missing it was a real bummer.

So when our youth pastors—Jay and Trent—announced that they were going to do their own version of March Madness—called Bible Character Madness—I was psyched. Here they were combining two of my favorite things—the Bible and Brackets!

What they ended up doing was picking 16 Bible characters, from the Old and New Testament. (They let me be part of the selection committee). Then they divided them into four regions and assigned them seeds—1 through 4 for each region. Then they used social media to have kids vote on each matchup. There were no instructions on how to vote: you could vote for a character based on name recognition, because you thought they had a really cool story, or because you thought they were really important to the Bible storyline. Or you could vote based on who you thought would win a game of one on one in basketball. It didn’t matter, you didn’t have to have a reason. (And by the way, Jesus was intentionally left off the bracket. We assume He would have won easily. At least He should have.)

The results were pretty cool. One half of the bracket was dominated by Moses, the #1 seed out of the East. He rolled to easy wins over Gideon, Peter, and Daniel to make the finals. On the other side of the bracket, though, there was a bit of a dark horse. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, started as a #2 seed and won an opening round matchup against John the Baptist. Then she pulled off an upset against the Apostle Paul before facing Noah in the semifinals. She won in a squeaker—winning by a mere 3 votes—before facing off against Moses. Based on previous margins of victory, we expected Moses to roll to an easy victory, but in a stunner Mary ended up defeating her third straight #1 seed to win the tournament.

And so, as we picked Bible characters for our Legendary series looking at Biblical heroes, we knew we needed to include Mary. Clearly, Mary the Mother of Jesus is an important part of the Bible’s story.

***Favorite***

In retrospect, maybe we should have known Mary would win. After all, one of the first things we learn about her is that she was highly favored. The beginning of her story is **Luke 1:26-28:**

**26**In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, **27**to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. **28**The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Favored. Think about that word, and what it might mean.

In a sporting context, we say that the higher seed or higher rank is the favorite to win. Especially in the sports betting world, it means more people are putting money on that team. In retrospect, we should have seeded Mary higher. She should have been the favorite.

But we also use the word in the world of interpersonal interaction: a “favor” is something nice you do for someone else. Most favors are acts of kindness, it’s something you do with no expectation of being paid back.

And then, of course, there’s the idea of “favorite” things. This is something we talk about with our kids: “What’s your favorite color?” “What’s your favorite animal?” “What’s your favorite flavor of ice cream?” The idea, of course, is that you prefer one over all the other items in the category. Purple is clearly the best color. Panthers are the greatest of all the animals. And good old vanilla is still the king of ice creams.

So, the word favor has to do with liking or approving of someone or something more than others. It means you look on someone with kind regard. It means that you do good things for them. And the first thing we learn about Mary, is that she was highly favored by God.

In fact, the word “favor” shows up at least three times in Mary’s story. The second time is **Luke 1:30**:

30But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.

Mary is highly favored. She has found favor with God. God has looked with kind regard upon her and He is going to do a great thing for her. And that, of course, is that she is going be with child and give birth to a Son whom she will name Jesus. He will be the Son of the Most High and a descendant of King David and He will have a kingdom that will never end.

Mary, though, sees a flaw in this plan: she’s not yet married and there’s no biological way for her to be pregnant. Gabriel replies that the child in her will be conceived by the Holy Spirit. As incredible as it sounds, he points out that even her relative Elizabeth—who was barren and well past child-bearing age, is currently in her sixth month of pregnancy. Then he adds, **verse 37:**

For nothing is impossible with God.

Mary, to her credit, tells the angel that she will do whatever the Lord asks of her. Then she sets off for Elizabeth’s house. When Elizabeth sees her, the child in her womb—who is John the Baptist—leaps for joy and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She declares that Mary is blessed among women and so is the child she will bear. Then the third use of the word “favor”. Elizabeth says, **in verse 43**:

43But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

There’s the idea, again, of God looking kindly upon someone—in this case it is Elizabeth who feels God’s favor.

All of which raises this question: what kind of person does God favor?

Being favored by God sounds like something I would like. And, apparently, God can show favor to more than one person. As any five year-old will tell you, you can have more than one favorite. God shows his favor to lots of people—we can all be people who are favored by God. My goal today is to use Mary’s story to show **how we can experience God’s favor.**

***Catholic Teaching on Mary***

Before I go on, though, I should pause for a moment and talk about the way Mary is viewed in the Catholic Church. Mary is very important in the traditions of our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church. Those of us in the Protestant branch of Christianity would say some of their beliefs about Mary come from outside of the Bible.

The official doctrine of the Catholic Church is that Mary is not worshipped, but venerated. In practice, that means that Catholics believe you can pray to Mary. Some of the key beliefs about Mary are the idea of the “immaculate conception”—which refers not to the circumstances of Jesus’ birth but of Mary’s; her perpetual virginity; and her assumption into heaven without physical death.

As I said, none of those things are taught in the Bible, and the idea of Mary’s perpetual virginity seems to be clearly contradicted. For one thing, Jesus had brothers, and unless you believe that Joseph already had children when he married Mary (which is not hinted at in the Bible) it would seem that they would have been the natural result of Mary and Joseph’s marital relations following Jesus’ birth. More than that, Matthew 1 says clearly that after Joseph’s dream of the angel, he took Mary home as his wife “but he had no union with her *until* she gave birth to a son.” (Matt. 1:25) Key word there is “until”, which implies that after Jesus’ birth they had a normal marital relationship.

One of the unfortunate side results of this teaching on Mary’s virginity and immaculate conception is the impression that there is something sinful about a sexual relationship within marriage. There isn’t. And there was nothing sinful about Mary and Joseph being a normal married couple.

More than that, while the Bible is clear that Mary was blessed by God and highly favored—and there is no doubt that we should appreciate her—there is nothing in the Bible that would indicate we should pray to her or that we need her to act as a go-between for us and Jesus.

Mary was not sinless. She rejoices in God, whom she calls her Savior (Luke 1:47). Why would she need a Savior if she was without sin? She needed Jesus just as much as the rest of us, and she was saved by Him just like the rest of us. The Bible calls her blessed and we can to, but we need to be clear that it is Jesus alone that saves. We do not worship Mary, nor should we.

I want to be clear: as I talk about how we can be favored by God, I’m not preaching a “be like Mary” sermon. I’m using Mary’s story to illustrate. We can learn from Mary. But the important thing here is not that we admire Mary, but that we admire Mary’s God. Because that is precisely where Mary directs our attention.

***The Magnificat***

After being greeted by Elizabeth, Mary breaks out into song. **Luke 1:46-55**. We’re going to let these verses serve as our primary text this morning:

46And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49for the Mighty One has done great things for me–holy is his name.  50His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.  51He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  52He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  53He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.  54He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.

This passage of scripture is known as the *magnificat*, from the Latin translation of **verse 46: “My soul glorifies…”** If you have the King James Version, that reads: “My soul magnifies…” That’s Mary’s intention here: to magnify God. To call our attention to who He is. And as she does, she teaches us who God favors.

I’m going to break Mary’s Song into three things we can learn about God, and in the process we will learn three things about the kind of people God favors.

***Holy is His Name***

First, Mary sings about **the One who is Mighty Over All.** God is the Holy One who does great things.  **Verse 49:**

49for the Mighty One has done great things for me–holy is his name.

God is the “Mighty One.” The name Mary gives God here derives from the root word for “dynamite”, it’s the Greek word for “power.” Mary is saying that God is powerful, the most powerful. He is the One who has all might. He stands in a class by Himself.

Holy is His name. That means that He is set apart from all others. He is completely and utterly unique. Completely free from sin. His ways are not our ways. He is separate from and exalted above every creature. All His attributes are perfect and they all cohere in a perfect harmony called holiness.

God is the Almighty. The All-Powerful. The Holy One.

God is Mighty Over All.

And this mighty God has used His mighty power to do great things for Mary, and her soul glorifies God for it. Her spirit rejoices in God’s saving power.

God is Mighty Over All.

Isn’t this exactly what Gabriel said to her when she questioned how she, as a maiden, could possibly conceive a child? **Luke 1:37**, he said:

For nothing is impossible with God.

God has the power to accomplish His purposes.

* A woman well-advanced in years who has been barren her whole life giving birth to John the Baptist? Not a problem for God.
* A young girl from a backwater village who never knew a man pregnant with the long awaited Messiah? Nothing is too difficult for God.
* The eternal Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, taking on flesh in the form of a human baby and taking up residence in the womb of a young woman? Easy for God.
* The Holy One coming on a rescue mission for men and women who are dead in trespasses and sins and offering salvation and new life? Nothing is impossible with God.

This is who God is. He is Mighty and Powerful and Capable and Sovereign over the world He created. God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly more than we can ask or even imagine according to His power at work in us (Ephesians 3:20).

So what does this say about whom God favors? I’ll say it like this: Because God is the One who is Mighty Over All, **Therefore He favors those who Magnify Him.** God favors those who rejoice in Him.

That’s what Mary is doing. Listen again **to verses 46 and 47:**

46And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

As I said, the word “glorify” could also be translated as “magnify.” The word in the original language is “megalynai”, a word which literally means “make large.”

Now, that might not make sense at first. We just said that God is mighty over all. He is the biggest, so how can Mary—or anybody else—make him bigger? But there are two senses to the word magnify. On the one hand, you can think of magnification like you would do with a microscope. Take something that is incredibly small, and enlarge it so that it becomes visible to the human eye. If that is how we think of magnification here, we are thinking completely wrong.

But the other way we magnify things is with a telescope. That’s where we take something incredibly big but not necessarily easy to see—like a star or a planet—and make it more visible.

That’s what Mary is doing here, and what we need to do too. Take something unimaginably huge, beyond our ability to comprehend in fact, and draw it to attention. Some may not be able to see God’s greatness, at times our sinful hearts fail to grasp it, and so we need to magnify the Lord.

So, let me ask you: how are you doing at rejoicing in the Mighty Power of God? Are you leaning on, depending upon, trusting in and singing about the power of God? Or are you doing it your own way?

Most of our troubles in this life stem from trying to do life our way instead of leaning on the power of God and doing things His way. But, good Christian, rejoice! God is mighty over all.

***The Great Reversal***

Now, you might be thinking, that’s easy for Mary to say. She just found out she was going to be the Mother of God’s Son. She was so great, God took notice of her. But who are we, that we think God would notice and do great things for us?

But that’s the point of the song: Mary was not great. God is great. But Mary was not. She was nothing but reverent and humble and trusting. And God chose a nobody like her because His might was directed by His mercy.

That’s the second thing for us to learn about God: **He is the One who is Merciful to the Weak.** God loves to undertake for the underdog. **Verses 51-53:**

51He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  52He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  53He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

We must avoid the mistake of thinking “that because God is great, He is partial to great men, or because God is exalted, He favors what is exalted among men. Just the opposite is the case. God’s holiness has expressed itself and will express itself by exalting the lowly and abasing the haughty.” (John Piper, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/meditation-on-the-magnificat>)

God has reversed the order of the world. The world normally gives great things to great people.  If you have wealth, power, or prestige then you get more wealth, more power, and more prestige.  If you are great, you get great things.  Our celebrity culture is built on that principle.

But this says that God has turned it all upside down.  God gives great things to not-so-great people who recognize their bankruptcy and fear Him alone. Mary says it three times, just to drive the point home:

* “His mercy extends to those who fear him”, verse 50
* “He has lifted up the humble”, verse 52
* “He has filled the hungry with good things”, verse 53.

Those who are weak, those who at the end of their resources, those who know they cannot help themselves, those are the ones God delights to help.

The opposite is also true. God has no time for those who think they are sufficient unto themselves. Mary says this three times as well:

* “He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts”, verse 51
* “He has brought down rulers from their thrones”, verse 52
* “He has sent the rich away empty”, verse 53

If you think that you are rich, if you think you are the king of your life, if you think you are good and capable and deserving of all that you have, then God will set Himself against you.

**1 Peter 5:5** puts it like this, quoting Proverbs 3:24:

5God opposes the proud

But gives grace to the humble.

Grace and mercy are those characteristics of God by which He is kind to those who do not deserve it. God is drawn to those who are humble and lowly of heart. As my friend Matt says: “God’s might is directed by God’s mercy.”

And so, who does God favor? I’ll put it like this: Because God is the One who is Merciful to the Weak, **therefore He Favors those who are Humble.**

Mary says this about herself in **verse 48:**

48for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,

Recognize your need for God. Stop thinking that you are the main character in your life’s story. Admit your need, your failures, your weakness. Admit that you would be hopeless to save yourself. Admit that everything you have, from the body you inhabit to the air that you breathe to the earth you stand upon belongs to Him and that you are entirely dependent on His great mercy.

Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God to experience the mercy of God.

***The Remembering God***

Then, third, Mary’s song directs our attention to **the One Who is Mindful of His Promises.** God remembers His covenant. **Verses 54 and 55:**

54He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.

God is Mindful of His Promises. God remembers the deal He made with Abraham and His offspring. He remembers His plan to bless them and make them a blessing to the world. (cf. Genesis 12:3) We could go back even farther, to Adam and Eve. God remembers His promise to crush the head of the serpent (cf. Genesis 3:15). He remembers His promise to establish the throne of His servant David (cf. 2 Samuel 7:8-16). God remembers.

My friend Matt, again: “God’s Might is directed by God’s Mercy and guaranteed by God’s Memory.”

And Mary knows, God always keeps His promises.

The Messiah has come. And Mary knows it.  She doesn’t know all that that will mean. But she knows that the Power and Might of God has come in His Mercy to those who have humbled themselves and has been fulfilled in the Messiah and guaranteed by God’s un-wavering commitment to His oath.

Matt, again: “God’s Might is directed by God’s Mercy and guaranteed by God’s Memory and fulfilled in God’s Messiah.”

So who does God favor? I’ll put it like this: Because God is the One who is mindful of His promises, **therefore He favors those who trust in Him.**

Because God always keeps His promises, we should trust in Him. Learn the promises, know the promises, believe the promises, stand on the promises, live out of the promises, and trust the promises. He will not forget them!

When Mary went to meet with Elizabeth, Elizabeth concluded her greeting by saying this in **Luke 1:45**:

45Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!

What Elizabeth says about Mary could also be said about us. Blessed are those who believe that what the Lord has said will be accomplished.

The word “believe” here means more than just to acknowledge that something is true. This is about more than just mentally co-signing what the Bible says; this is about trusting in what God has said, about building your life on it. It means responding the way Mary did after Gabriel gave her her assignment, **verse 38:**

38”I am the Lord’s Servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.”

Mary believed. She humbled herself before the Lord. She rejoiced in God her savior.

And because God is like this...because God is Mighty and Merciful and Mindful of His Promises....Because God’s might is directed by God’s mercy, guaranteed by God’s memory and fulfilled by God’s Messiah...

Then we can do the same:

**Magnify your Savior**

**Humble yourself before Him**

**Trust in His promises**

And you too, will experience the favor of the Lord.