

Lessons from the Christmas Event  
Luke 1:26-38

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I recently read about an atheist who went on a hike on a remote nature trail. He was enjoying the scenery and wild life so much that he lost track of the trail. When it was time for him to go back, he realized that he was hopelessly lost. In that state of panic, he did something that he had not done before. He prayed to God for help.

The man did make it out of the forest and was sharing his experience with some friends. When the atheist mentioned praying, one of his friends asked him, "How did God answer your prayer?" The atheist replied, "Well, before God could answer the prayer, a guide came along and brought me to safety."

Sadly, this man could not see God's hand in the answer.<sup>1</sup> It didn't happen the way he thought it should happen.

It's amazing how we can be looking for something; then not see it when it comes! That's exactly what happened to Israel (as a whole) when Messiah appeared the first Christmas. Nothing was more anticipated in Jewish society than the coming of Messiah. Yet when it happened, very few people even recognized that it was happening. Why was that? What can we learn from their experience?

This morning I want to look at **four categories of people** who encountered the coming of Messiah and draw a few **lessons from their experience**.

**(I) the FAITHFUL remnant who were waiting for the Consolation of Israel.**

These were people who were watching for His coming. These were people who meditated upon the Word and lived consecrated lives. Spiritually speaking, these were the true insiders.

Let's begin with Mary in Luke 1:26-38.

*"Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" 29 But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. 30 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. 33 And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." 34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" 35 And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. 37 For with God nothing will be impossible." 38 Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be*

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<sup>1</sup> Palitha Jayasooriya, "The God of the Unexpected Divine Appointments," accessed at [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com). on 12-18-15.

*to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*

(1) Mary was surprised by Gabriel's visit. She was not expecting an angel to come by and give her a message from God. Up until the moment of that visit, Mary was probably living life as she normally lived it. There was nothing unusual about the day. She is taking care of her routine responsibilities. Suddenly an angel appears in her life! Can you imagine that kind of thing happening in your life? Can you imagine walking to the car after work and suddenly in the parking lot an angel appears and starts talking to you? It happened to Zacharias earlier in this chapter. It happened to Jacob at Bethel. It happened to Moses at the Burning Bush. It happened to Gideon at the threshing floor. Suddenlies do happen. It happened to Mary when Gabriel showed up. She was surprised by his visit.

(2) Mary was also surprised by Gabriel's greeting.

Gabriel's greeting was also a surprise. "*Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!*" I don't think Mary viewed herself as anything special. Yes, she was committed to the Lord. She was living a consecrated life. But she did not see herself as a "*highly favored one.*" I would question her humility if she had. Yet God's favor was on her life. In terms of social position, she was a nobody. The royal blood of David flowed through her veins; but that brought her no special favor with people around her. Mary was a poor teenage girl. She was in a lowly position because of her financial status. She was in a low position because she was female. She was in a lowly position simply because she was very young. But in the final analysis, none of that really mattered. What really mattered was the favor that God had bestowed on her. What really mattered was this one fact declared by the Archangel Gabriel, "*the Lord is with you.*" More than social position; more than money or fame, I want to know that the Lord is with me. If that is the case, other things will work themselves out. We know Mary was surprised by this greeting because verse 29 says, "*...she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.*"

(3) Mary was surprised by Gabriel's message.

You're going to conceive a Son. You will call His name Jesus. He will be great and be called "*the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. 33 And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.*" That is unmistakable language describing the Messiah. Mary was surprised that she would be chosen to give birth to the Messiah. But her greatest consternation was with how this could possibly happen since she was not in any sexual relationship with a man. The language of this passage leaves no doubt that Jesus was supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit and that Mary was a virgin. Anyone who denies that fact is simply denying the validity of Scripture. You can be a little dismayed about how God could do that; that's ok. But to deny the truth that is clearly declared here is a different matter. In my studies of theology, I have found there are two kinds of theologians. There are those who highly regard Scripture as authoritative. And there are those who highly regard their own reasoning as authoritative. I have no respect for the latter regardless of what their IQ may be. "*Let God be true and every man a liar.*" Once you deny the inspiration and authority of Scripture you have stepped onto a slippery slope and on your way down! I believe the Bible is the inspired word of God. I take it as it is and live my life accordingly. I do not twist it to fit what I want it to say. I do not twist it to my own

destruction.<sup>2</sup> Mary receives this word in faith from Gabriel; but is wondering how it can happen.

Verse 34, *“Then Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I do not know a man?’*  
35 *And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.’* This is a clear declaration of the divinity of Christ.

So even to this consecrated follower of the Lord—a person who was watchful and looking for the coming of Messiah—the person most involved in the process once it began—even for her, the way God brought it about was a surprise.

Earlier in this chapter, Zacharias was surprised as well. He and his wife Elizabeth were consecrated, godly people. For years, they had sought the Lord for children; but they were now old and their prayer had not been answered. Unlike Mary, it is a very special day for Zacharias. He has the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to offer up the incense in the Holy Place of the Temple.<sup>3</sup> While He is doing that the angel, Gabriel, appeared to him and told him that Elizabeth would become pregnant and give birth to John the Baptist.

What I want you to see is that these are people were looking for Messiah to come and were living godly lives. Yet when the event occurs, even they are surprised by how God does it. Zacharias was surprised to see the angel. He was so surprised by the message that he couldn’t even believe it. Had prayed for it for years; but when the answer came couldn’t believe it was really happening! As you may know, the angel silenced him until the word came to pass. This was a grace judgement. It was a judgement on Zacharias’ unbelief; but it was also a protection to keep him from talking his way out of the blessing. God’s mercy is usually somewhere even in His judgements.

I consider myself pretty serious about serving the Lord. I would hope that He would count me faithful. And I suspect most of you would consider yourself the same way. Here is the lesson I see in this part of our history lesson. We may have a good idea what God is going to do. We have revelation in Scripture and God speaks to our hearts. Even with all that, we could experience some surprise about exactly how God brings His will to pass in the days ahead. This is a lesson in humility. Leave a few blank spots and a few question marks on your eschatology charts. When I first started preaching I could tell you exactly where the rapture goes in God’s program. I had the seven-year tribulation all figured out and a pretty good idea of how to identify the mark of the beast. Are you following me? After about 40 years of prayer and study, I have put a big eraser on the end of my eschatology pencil just in case I might have gotten something a little off. I’m not near as dogmatic or as argumentative as I once was. What I do know is that Jesus is Coming Back and I want to be as pure and loyal to Him as I can every day in anticipation of that Coming.

The one thing we find in common among these faithful people that God used and honored at Messiah’s first coming is that their hearts were tender and humble before the Lord. Prov. 4:23 *“Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.”* Mary’s response to the incredible message Gabriel brought her was consistent with the way she lived every day of

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Peter 3:15-17; 1:19-21; 2 Tim. 3:13-16

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:5-25. Darrell L. Bock provides interesting information on Zacharias’ service in the Temple. See p. 48 of *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

her life. Luke 1:38 "*Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.*" I live to serve the Lord; He can use me any way He wants.

In Luke 2:25 we are introduced to another faithful follower of the Lord. His name is Simeon. When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple to consecrate him to the Lord, Simeon had been led by the Holy Spirit to go there. He immediately knew by the Spirit that this is the Messiah. He took Jesus in his arms and prophesied over him. Simeon was not an official at the temple. He was just a man who walked with God. He walked close enough with God that the Lord had already shown him that he would get to see the Messiah before his death. The people who are in on what God is doing were not necessarily the high profile people. Anna was an 84 year old widow who was also in on the secret things of the Lord.

We are not so arrogant as to think we have all the end times figured out. But we would want to be like Simeon and Anna in our walk with the Lord, so that He lets us in on what He is doing. God did that for Abraham;<sup>4</sup> He did it for Simeon and Anna; and He will do it for us if we will keep close to Him.

Lesson: Even the faithful can be surprised by the way God brings His plan to pass.

## **II. the DISTANT yet interested gentiles.**

This group is represented by the Magi. Their knowledge of God is limited. But they were operating in what they knew. They were in search of the truth. They were hungry for more. These wise men were from around Persia or Babylon—Iran or Iraq.<sup>5</sup> How in the world did they know about the promised king of the Jews? About 600 years earlier a teenage boy had been taken to that area as one of the Jewish captives. This young boy was sold out to God and God raised him up as a mighty prophet in that land. His name was Daniel and he was familiar with the prophesy in Num. 24:17 "*A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel...*"

When God chose to visit His people who would have expected a group of gentiles living 500 miles away to be key players in the event? Their gifts are probably what sustained Mary and Joseph financially when they were in Egypt. People you would have never guessed got involved with what God was doing. And this is typical of the way God does things. Wherever God finds hungry hearts—no matter how far they are from Him, He will draw them to Himself.

Lesson: Even the distant can get in on what God is doing if hearts are open and hungry.<sup>6</sup>

There was a vast difference between these gentiles and the faithful remnant in Israel that we talked about a few minutes ago. But they have one essential element in common—an openness and hunger toward God. Outwardly their appearances and lifestyles were very different. But God looks upon the heart and He found in both groups a receptivity to His presence and to what He wanted to do.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 18:17; Psalm 25:14.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 2:1-21, (magoi) originally denoted the priestly caste among the Persians and Babylonians (from The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1962 by Moody Press). Since Matt. 2:1 only tells us they were from the east, we can not be certain where they came from.

<sup>6</sup> Consider Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the centurion (Matt. 8:5-13), the Canaanite mother (Matt. 15:21-28).

In the Christmas story, these two diverse groups (the faithful remnant of Israel and the distant inquirers from the East) all had a wonderful part in what God was doing. A third group did not!

### **III. the RESISTANT and self-satisfied actually opposed the Coming of the Lord.**

The Magi went to King Herod expecting to find a worshipper of God in the Jewish palace. Instead they encountered a worker of iniquity. Herod had life the way he wanted it. He had position, wealth, and power. His whole orientation toward the coming of the Lord was one of hostility and defense. He saw this visitation as a possible disturbance of his chosen lifestyle. God shows up in Bethlehem and Herod has all the baby boys 2 years and younger slaughtered.

The most likely people to receive Messiah were also part of the crowd that resisted him. The High Priest in Jerusalem was the official religious leader. He was the visible representative of God. He was the pope of the true Jewish religion. You would naturally expect him to be the one God let in on His activities. But this man was a part of the crowd that eventually killed Jesus. The same could be said for the Scribes and Pharisees. All these people were big shots in the God-ordained religion. Yet they were not part of God's "in crowd". Their hearts were hardened and closed to everything God wanted to do.

The lesson here: position and relationship with God are not necessarily the same thing. One of the things God will teach true Christians is the value of submission. We have to learn how to submit to authority—even imperfect authority. For most of us independent Americans, that is a hard lesson to learn. But there is a difference between positional authority and spiritual authority. It's good when they come together in a godly leader. Prov. 29:2 "*When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; But when a wicked man rules, the people groan.*"

King Ahab & Queen Jezebel had positional authority over the nation of Israel. They were ungodly people in authority over God's people. They had positional authority. Elijah had spiritual authority. In one sense he was a nobody coming out of nowhere. But he had spiritual authority with God. It's informative to understand how God had him interact with the positional authority.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus was just a peasant from Nazareth as far as the religious rulers in Jerusalem were concerned. Their question was, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" Yet from a higher throne, God had granted Jesus all authority in heaven and earth. These religious rulers flouted their position of authority. Jesus walked in the authority of the Holy Spirit.

I'm simply making the observation that at Messiah's first coming, God did not work through these prominent religious leaders. The people you would naturally expect to be in the know were not informed by God or even included in what God was doing. In fact, they resisted what God was doing.

Lesson: Position and Relationship with God are not necessarily the same thing.

By far the vast majority fell into the fourth and final category.

### **IV. the INDIFFERENT and pre-occupied.**

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<sup>7</sup> A person who has not been disciplined by God in submission to authority cannot walk in true spiritual authority. Those who operate in spiritual authority have been humbled by the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. I hope no one would use what is said here as an excuse for rebellion. However, there are times when spiritual authority has to confront ungodly positional authority (Exodus 3; Daniel 3:18; Acts 5:29).

We have talked about people who were at least aware something was going on. Herod and the religious rulers in Jerusalem were aware and resistant. The Magi were aware and curious. The Faithful remnant were aware and cooperative. But all those together were a small minority of the population. Think about this for a moment. Bethlehem was so crowded that there was no room in the inn. Mary had to give birth to Jesus in a barn. Hundreds of people brushed by Mary and Joseph in the streets of Bethlehem and were totally oblivious to anything special going on. The inn keeper obviously didn't think anything special was happening. Had he grasped the significance of this visitation, he would have given them his room.

The way this visitation happened, it was possible to be standing right beside it and miss it altogether. We usually assume that if God really showed up we couldn't help but notice it. But that's not always the case. God has a way of hiding His glory so that only the pure in heart can see it.<sup>8</sup> He hides it in a teenage girl named Mary—who is not famous and not considered special by most people. He hides it in a barn—the last place you would look for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He later hides it in a carpenter working with his hands to make a living for the family. The natural tendency we all have is to look on the outward appearance of things and make a determination based on that. Is it big? Is it exciting? Is it popular? Is it successful? Surely God is in that. No, He is there with a poor young couple who can't even get a room and have to deliver their baby in a stinking barn.

The greatest danger most of us face is not gross sin—not carousing and drinking on Saturday night. The greatest danger we face is pre-occupation with good things—personal goals, great opportunities, other priorities. All those people on the streets of Bethlehem who encountered Joseph & Mary on that first Christmas, where were they going? What were they busy doing—buying and selling, marrying and divorcing, eating and drinking? Whatever had their attention, robbed them of something absolutely wonderful. Whatever good thing they were pursuing could not have possibly been as valuable as the visitation of God right under their noses.

Jesus closed a discourse on His second coming with these words in Luke 21:34-36

*"But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. 35 For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. 36 Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."*

Four lessons from His first coming:

- (1) Even the elect can be surprised by the way God does things.
- (2) Even those that are distant can get in on what God is doing if their hearts are hungry.
- (3) People we might expect to be in the know, will be left out if their hearts are not right.
- (4) Most people miss God because they are simply too busy with other things.

Pray

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<sup>8</sup> Matt. 5:8