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December 2019 MARY'S EXAMPLE OF FAITH

Dear Friends,

So much has been taught over the years about living by faith and how we are to trust God in everything we do. The eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews is referred to by many as the Faith Hall of Fame because it lists so many saints of old as examples of people who trusted God. Even today we hear powerful stories of Christians and their walk of faith.

But without question, one of the greatest acts of faith in all of history is revealed in the following verses:

²⁶And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

²⁹And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

³⁰And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. ³¹And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. ³²He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: ³³And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

³⁴Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

³⁵And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. ³⁶And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. ³⁷For with God nothing shall be impossible.

³⁸And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Some may wonder why I would call what Mary did a great act of faith. To understand this more clearly we need to consider what she would be facing by agreeing to what the angel said.

She was a virgin and by agreeing to conceive Jesus she was going to have an encounter with the power of God in a way that no other human ever has or ever will again: *The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.* Though many people before her had experienced God's power, nothing like this had ever taken place. She had absolutely no precedent to which she could refer.

She was going to get pregnant with the Son of God. Can you imagine what thoughts might have crossed her mind? I have heard many women speak of their pregnancies and how careful they were not to do anything which could harm the baby, but they weren't carrying the Savior of the world, the King of kings. I do not doubt that almost every day she demonstrated unparalleled caution to protect God's child, trusting Him to help her make the right decisions.

She was a virgin, yet she was going to eventually start "showing" as the baby in her began to grow. How in the world would she be able to clearly explain to her friends and other people that she was still a virgin? How could she possibly convince them that "God had gotten her pregnant"? People would think she was completely out of her mind! She had to be ready to trust God to help her endure the ridicule she would encounter.

Mary was espoused to Joseph, which means they were engaged. But engagement under Jewish law was vastly different from engagements as we know them today. In those days an engagement could last up to one year. During that time a couple was essentially considered to be married, even though they lived separately and were not intimate. In fact, in the Jewish law if an engaged man were to die, the woman was referred to as "a virgin who is a widow".

Further, if an engaged person were to be intimate with someone else it was considered an act of adultery. If discovered, the innocent person could bring charges of adultery against the one to whom he or she was engaged. A trial would be held and the guilty person would be stoned. How in the world would Mary be able to convince Joseph she had not become an adulteress? I'm guessing she tried, but it took a visitation by an angel to convince Joseph that Mary was innocent,

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. ¹⁹Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

²⁰But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

²¹And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

²²Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

²³Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: ²⁴and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

(Matthew 1:18-25)

Joseph must have deeply loved Mary because he didn't want to embarrass her publicly. But nevertheless, once he found out she was pregnant he did not readily accept her explanation until the angel visited him and confirmed what Mary said. What this means is that when Mary agreed to carry the Lord's baby, she knew it could cost her her marriage, that no man may ever want to marry her, and that she might have to live alone in public shame the rest of her life, doing her

best to raise Jesus as a single mother. Even so, she acted in faith that God would sustain her though any such situations.

But Joseph wasn't the only person Mary would have to convince. How would she explain this to her parents; would they put her out? What would her father do? You see, under Jewish law a father had the right to bring charges against his unwed, pregnant daughter before the elders and religious leaders. If found guilty, she was then made to stand in front of the doorpost of her home and be stoned. Mary knew such a thing could happen, but she trusted God to protect her.

Let's also consider how the priest, scribes, and Pharisees of her local synagogue would respond to her story of an angelic visitation and pregnancy by the power of the Holy Ghost. It would sound like blasphemy to make such an accusation against God! Would they officially charge her with blasphemy? Would they try to stone her for her outlandish tale? If they didn't stone her, they could excommunicate her from the synagogue. Whenever this was done, it was perceived as a death sentence because those who were excommunicated were told that God had severed them from both Himself and eternity in Heaven. You can see again how Mary was placing her very life in God's hands.

Along with all of these things, Mary would live the rest of her life with the stigma of what had happened. We read with joy her story in the scriptures each year as we celebrate Christmas. But she lived everyday of her life with this event. Do you really think that as the years went by people forgot the story she had told? Can't you just hear them... *"That's Mary, you know, the one I told you about; the one back 20 years ago who told people....."*

Are you starting to see more clearly why I say that Mary's was one of the greatest acts of faith in all of history? Really, she epitomizes what Jesus said in Luke 14:26-33,

²⁶If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? ²⁹Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, ³⁰Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.

³¹Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? ³²Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace.

³³So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.

When Mary said, "Be it unto me according to thy word," she was choosing to put God first before her family, friends, and even her own life. We could say that the cross she bore was to face every consequence associated with the decision to give birth to the Son of God; and it was a cross she willingly accepted. Unlike anyone before or since, her life was forever changed by choosing to follow the will of God. Much is said about the faith of Abraham; but I have to tell you, the faith of Mary is right up there with his.

This all brings me to a very important question: How much do you and I really trust God? Do we really love Him more than our family? More than our friends? More than our own life? What are we willing to endure to fulfill the will of God? Do we really want to be a disciple (disciplined follower) of Jesus?

What does it mean to be a disciplined follower? Jesus said we have to bear our cross. In Luke 9:23 He said, "...If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." And just what is our cross? It is that which we, by choice, take up each day. It is God's will for our lives. It is living by every word that proceeds from God. It is trusting Him to strengthen, empower and supply all that is needed to accomplish His will.

While it was an angel that visited Mary to explain to her God's will, we don't have to sit around and hope for a similar angelic visitation. We have access to God Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit. He will speak to us and reveal what God desires for our lives. Quite honestly, we could say that part of the cross we bear is to discipline ourselves to spend time with the Holy Spirit to receive instructions from Heaven.

Just about the greatest gift we could give this year would be presenting to God a decision to follow after the faith-pattern of people like Abraham and Mary. Let's learn from the example of Mary and realize that no matter what God asks us to do, He will be there to help. We can never go wrong by loving Him more than anyone or anything!

May the Christ of Christmas fill your life and home with His presence!

Jim

>>> A SPECIAL CHRISTMAS TREAT FROM ME TO YOU! <<<

The first church I pastored was in Springboro, Ohio. One year at Christmas, the churches in Springboro published a cookbook. Each church was responsible for supplying a certain number of recipes to be included in the cookbook. Proceeds from the sales of the cookbooks went to various projects within the community.

Our church had a small congregation. Though recipes were turned in, we were one recipe short of our required number. Not being very skilled in the culinary arts, I didn't know what to do. So, to meet our goal, I sat down at my dining room table and fabricated a recipe I called "Chocolate Glop Cake" and turned it in with the rest. The recipe was – to me – so outlandish I thought for sure the person overseeing the project would recognize it as a joke and not include it in the cookbook. Wrong!

On the day our allotment of cookbooks was delivered to me at our church, the lady in charge of the project had a big smile on her face and said, "You know, that recipe for Chocolate Glop Cake was really interesting. I made it at home and my kids absolutely loved it!" I was mortified, to say the least. I couldn't believe that she, or anyone else, would have thought it to be a genuine recipe. But sure enough, there it was in the "Pies, Pastry & Desserts" section of the cookbook! (I don't think I ever told her I had made it up.)

Therefore, since my chocolate concoction birthed out of a flavorful imagination was a big hit back then, I will share the “highly sought after” recipe with you here. If you like chocolate, you are in for a major treat.

CHOCOLATE GLOP CAKE

Ingredients: 1 chocolate fudge cake mix (any brand will work)
1 to 1¼ lb bag of semi-sweet chocolate morsels
4 regular size Hershey chocolate bars
Chocolate fudge icing (any brand will work)
1 or more bags of chocolate sprinkles

Follow directions for preparing cake batter as listed on the box. Mix in semi-sweet morsels. Pour in baking pan as instructed on box. Break Hershey bars into small squares (as divided on bars). Place squares evenly on top of batter. Bake as indicated on cake box. Cool. Spread icing. Sprinkle chocolate sprinkles on top. (Serve to children at your own risk ☺☺☺.)

Merry Christmas!

P.S. - Like many children, I eagerly looked forward to Christmas morning and all the presents that would have my name on them. Though I understood that Christmas was the celebration of the birth of Jesus, I didn't understand there was something greater to experience than the gifts I would unwrap. If you would like to receive a CD of a special sermon about what I have learned since then, please use the form below to order, *Christmas Presence*

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