



OUR
CHRISTMAS SURPRISE

Presented by

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Luke 1 :51-53

What's surprising about Christmas?

Not very much. No other holiday is celebrated in more places than Christmas. And no other holiday has been celebrated longer. Every year, regular as the other seasons, the Christmas season enters our world; it grows and swells until the celebration of Christmas itself, and then it slowly ebbs away again.

Of course, there are certain surprises that occur in our lives—when gifts are received that are totally unexpected. I'll never forget a little girl who one day received a gift that overwhelmed her. Her mother had made her a wardrobe for her doll and had made a specially bright colored box to keep it in. "Oh, mother, you shouldn't do it!" The words of a child, overcome by astonishment and appreciation, made Christmas for her family special that year. Yes, there are surprises, but even these become fewer as people grow older and find ways of letting one another know what they need in shirts and ties and blouses.

So we must admit that this week again, as we will celebrate Christmas once more, it will be pleasant and even joyous for many of us, but surprising? No, not really. Most of us have become accustomed to Christmas. Strange that we have, really, for Christmas is in fact itself the greatest surprise of all.

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Yes, it is, and not only because a very surprising event occurred when Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, was born in human flesh. To be sure, that was a unique miracle. But it was surprising when it first occurred centuries ago because at Christmastime God did things in a way that man never expected He would. If man had planned Christmas, he would have planned it differently, you can be absolutely sure of that.

Mary the mother of Jesus felt how God worked in unexpected ways perhaps better than anyone else. And she expressed it in a song she sang before Jesus was born. She and many of her fellow countrymen were expecting the coming of the Messiah, the gloriously holy and powerful person who was going to bring liberation to the people of Israel. But she never thought He would do it as He did.

What impressed her was that God chose to bring His Son into the world through her. We have come to associate Mary with Christmas, and there is no other woman who has received more respect and awakened more interest than she has. So she has become famous, an international celebrity whose fame has endured for centuries. But she was not that kind of person when she became the handmaiden of the Lord.

When she was told by an angel messenger that she was going to be the mother of the Christ child her first question was related to the way this was going to happen. She was a virgin. Her marriage, though planned, was not scheduled for some time. God explained to her how it was going to happen this way: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;

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therefore the child to be born will be called the Son of God (Lukel :35). And that was that. We never read that Mary was puzzled about the physiological elements of the miracle again. That really didn't surprise her that much. But something else did. That God used her - that puzzled her. That surprised her. She was an unknown, insignificant, humble Jewish girl, living in the small and ordinary city of Nazareth - that God used her was the surprise of Christmas so far as she was concerned.

And when we read the Bible, we discover that she talked about her surprise, or rather she sang about it, in a beautiful song that expressed astonishment at the way God works, and she sang her song in the presence of her kinswoman Elizabeth.

Yes, Elizabeth ... her story, too, is part of the surprise of Christmas. She was an elderly woman, the wife of a priest, and she and her husband had one grievous burden that crushed them year after year. They had no children. Elizabeth was barren. Perhaps it was the force of habit that old Elizabeth and old Zechariah, her husband, kept on praying for a child. They had done it so long and so fervently that the momentum kept them going even after it was physically impossible for them to have a child anymore. But, even though it seemed strange that they kept praying, God was listening. John the Baptist was their son. He was a child of miracle, too.

And so it was that when God announced to Mary that she was going to be the mother of the Christ child, to show her how it would all be possible, the angel messenger told Mary Elizabeth's good news. This is what he said: "Behold, your kinswoman

Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible" (Lukel :36, 37). And Mary said, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1 :3B).

Ah, yes, more surprises. That a barren woman could become an instrument of God's salvation and have a son, and that a virgin who had not known a man could. The point is that those fruitless lives received the veiled scorn of those who gloried in their own stalwartness. One, the other, hardly more than a child herself, not yet having experienced the intimate attention of her husband - that God used them, this was surprising indeed.

Thus, when the two women met for the first time they did (Mary fairly flew to Elizabeth's side once she knew they were both being used by the Almighty) when they met, Mary expressed her astonishment in a beautiful poetry. This is the description of their meeting, found in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel:

"In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city called Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord'" (Luke 1 :39-45).

Mary replied in the words of a beautiful song. Notice how surprised she was at the way God worked: " 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and excited those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away' " (Luke 1 :46-53).

Now do you see where Mary's amazement was centered? Not on the miracle of supernatural birth, but on the way God used the lowly to accomplish His exalted purposes. God doesn't use the proud, He doesn't use the mighty, but He uses the lowly and the weak. This is the great surprise of Christmas time. And those who are surprised today as Mary was, so many years ago, will benefit from Christmas once again this year.

God works differently from the way man works. He does His work in such an unexpected way. The way God worked with the shepherds at Christmas shows this, too.

Shepherds received the great revelation of the Savior's birth before anyone else received it. And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, 'Be not

afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!' " (Luke 2:8-14).

There was never a choir like this before in the history of man, and there never will be again. But it was wasted on an audience of shepherds in a field. We would say "wasted". If only some promoter had known that this choir was going to appear, he could have booked the biggest auditorium in Jerusalem. But no. The choir sang for outcast shepherds, lonely men.

Strange how shepherds have awakened the derision of their fellow men throughout the centuries. When Joseph's father and brothers came down to Egypt centuries before the heavenly choir appeared, Joseph had apologized to Pharaoh for their occupation—they were shepherds—" every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians" (Genesis 46:34). In his book, *Centennial*, James Michener tells how shepherds were murdered when they tried to introduce sheep into the grazing land of Wyoming and Colorado in the 1880's. No shepherd thought he would ever occupy the center stage of human history. But God bypassed the priests and rabbis and the scribes and the Pharisees the great religious leaders of the nation, and He announced Christ's birth to them.

Mary was right about the way God works, wasn't

she? In her song she declared that God "scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree..." Oh, she was more right than she even knew herself.

Why, even the town in which Jesus was born was an example of the way God uses the small and the humble to do His great work. The prophet Micah had foretold how Bethlehem would be used some day, but when he had, he had to say, "But you, O Bethlehem ... who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2). Little Bethlehem became the birthplace of the Son of God.

This is the way God works. What difference does it make for you that God works this way?

Well, think about this. At Christmas time we should be surprised at the way God works. We are impressed by big things. God uses small things. We are impressed by men of great reputation and honor. God uses the lowly and the humble. We are impressed with mighty power. God uses that which appears to be weak and insignificant. As Mary said, "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."

The only people who can be saved from the wrath to come by the Christ of Christmas are those who understand this.

Every Christian has to take this Christmas surprise very seriously. We are living in a time when there are impressive religious organizations which are carrying on very impressive work. And they are using all the powers of public relations firms

and advertising firms in order to get their job done. This is a time of great churches and of great and famous preachers.

What does the Christmas surprise mean with respect to this? Well, it means that you shouldn't be overly impressed by these big religious organizations just because they are big. As you try to evaluate them you must ask if the glory of Christ is always uppermost as they conduct their work.

And for those who are religious leaders and who find themselves working on the level where it seems that organizations must be big in order to get the job done, there must always be a great deal of modesty, and even uneasiness. For God delights in using the small. He delights in picking up the unexpected tool and using it in His way and for His purposes. This doesn't mean that God cannot and will not use large and impressive Christian organizations to do His work, but just because a Christian organization is very impressive, it does not mean that, therefore, it is doing the work of the Lord. Those who work in these organizations must continuously examine their own lives to make sure they are humble and modest people. And they must make sure they do not take to themselves the usual trappings of power and prestige that accompany bigness in the world of business and government.

On a more personal level, all this means that each of us can receive the grace of the saving Christ only if we humble ourselves before the Lord. Again and again the Bible declares that God resists the proud but He gives grace to the humble. Mary saw this clearly as she herself received the exaltation of the Lord, though she was lowly.

The blessing of the Lord is available to those who

approach God with a knowledge of their own emptiness. This too, was part of Mary's message when she said, "He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away." Those who are filled already cannot be filled by the mighty hand of God. Those who are rich in their own resources and strength cannot be empowered by the mighty power of the living God. Those who feel that they are healthy never benefit from the kindly ministrations of the Great Physician.

Jesus Himself emphasized the necessity of our sensing the depths of our own need when He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . Blessed are those who mourn. . . Blessed are the meek. . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. ." (Matthew 5:3-6). Such people are candidates for the kingdom of heaven. And this is the reason God so often takes people down from the pinnacle of their independence and pride, sometimes using sickness and misfortune. Then, humbled by the circumstances of life, they turn as never before and receive the wonder of God's salvation.

As we marvel this season of the year at the unexpected and surprising way God carries out His work and accomplishes His salvation in the lives of His people, we must express the humility that Mary expressed.

The Christ child of Christmas can be your Savior, if you humble yourself before Him. The only way this can happen is that you believe that this Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of the Living God. You must believe that when He died, He made payment for the sins of His people. And you must believe that when He died, He died for you. You must under-

stand that in yourself, you are worthy of damnation. But in Christ, through His life, death, and resurrection, you can be saved.

The great surprise of Christmas is that God lifts up lowly, undeserving sinners and makes them His blessed people. This is amazing grace. Believe that Jesus is your Savior and you will be surprised at what God can do with you.

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