

# Answered Prayers (Part 2)

## Series: Christmas at Grace

Luke 1:26-38; 2:22-35

Dr. Matt Cassidy --- December 22, 2019

Wow, thank you. I love music. I love how it does something to you, right? It gets the heart of the soul. Powerful words ...

Well, Merry Christmas, Grace! Happy Birthday! It's a birthday party – Happy Birthday, Jesus! And we learned last week that the birthday party was a surprise birthday party.

**The very essence of Christmas is that it breaks upon you brilliantly and abruptly. At one moment the great day is not and the next moment the great day is.**

**--- G. K. Chesterton**

I fell into this quote by G. K. Chesterton when I was studying for this series and I found this interesting. “The very essence of Christmas is that it breaks upon you brilliantly and abruptly. At one moment the great day is not and the next moment the great day is.”

It's a surprise party. And the reason Christmas is a surprise – we looked at it last week, anyway – was because that saints, good, faithful people, were praying that God would come into their story. And they prayed that, but I'm not sure they completely believed that He would or that He could. And when He did, they were stunned. They were surprised because they said, *Lord, help us! Hear our prayer!* And He said, *Okay*. And they thought, *What?!* Surprise!

So, this week I want to look at how it's a surprise story, not because of people not expecting Him to answer, but actually because of the way He answers. The way God responds is not the way they expected. The shock in this is the way God works in our lives. And as the saying goes, *The Lord works in mysterious ways*. Surprise! That's how it works. If you live long enough, you're going to find that life sends us experiences so as to force us to make decisions about what we're going to do with our ambitions, our plans, our hopes, our dreams. It's a surprise. We don't have to understand it completely.

We don't like maybe what's happening in our job, or our parents get a divorce, or we do – we get a divorce. Or we get a doctor's report that we don't like. Or that we worry and we cannot stop worrying. All these sorts of things are surprises that life gives us. And we don't like these surprises. We don't want any part of that. What we want is to live in a place where we never get unpleasant surprises, but that place doesn't exist.

And the story of Christmas – certainly, one of the attributes of the stories of Christmas is the attribute of peace, the peace that can maintain us, certainly when times are good, but rather, a peace that does more than that. It invades our life when life is not well, during bad times. And that's why when Jesus comes and He teaches, He says, "I leave you my peace. It is my peace I give you, not the peace of the world." My peace – a supernatural, inexplicable peace. That's the peace we need. That's what the Christmas story in many ways is about.

The peace of the world He's mentioning, the peace the world gives, is fine as long as your mood is good and your circumstances are okay. The peace the Lord talks about here, that He gives us, that He leaves us, is way past that.

But hear this – here's the point. That serenity, supernatural, inexplicable serenity, is not a cause. It's an effect. It is a byproduct of something else. It is the consequence of building your life on a solid foundation of absolute surrender to the glory of God. That's how it happens. When Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you," He meant that. Seek first the kingdom of God, no matter what.

Here's the point. Ultimate, unconditional surrender brings this unimaginable peace from Jesus Christ. Peace comes when we make a resolution that we will trust in the providence of God. And that's a word with purpose. Providence means God is sovereign even when life is extremely difficult, in context of evil.

Ultimately, we make decisions. Do we want to live our life with God's help? Or do we want to live a life where we play a very small part in what God wants us to do? When we talk about ultimate surrender and we talk about this kind of peace, we're talking about – metaphorically, think of it this way. It's an exchange of dreams. Let's just say that your soul only has the capacity to hold one set of dreams and hopes and ambitions. You can hold onto yours or you can hold onto God's. But if you want this peace that we're going to talk about today, a supernatural, transcendent kind of serenity, you have to do this. You're going to have to take

your dreams and put them down and leave them there. And they will die. And as they die, you will grieve. If you think I'm being facetious or exaggerating, when a dream dies, you grieve that dream. You go through stages of grief at its death. And when that's done, look at you – empty hands and all sorts of freedom. Now just wait and watch and see what God can do when you take His dreams for your life and you let Him control all things, and when you seek first His kingdom, His righteousness, no matter what.

### **Gabriel Visits Mary**

That's what we're going to talk about today. We're going to look at the life of Mary. It's the Christmas story, and so, we'll look at how this applies to our life as it applied to the life of Mary.

#### **Luke 1:31-32, 34-35**

**“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. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David ...” <sup>34</sup> Mary asked the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” <sup>35</sup> 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.”**

Some of you probably know the story of Mary's visitation from the angel Gabriel. This is what happens. Gabriel says to her, “ ‘You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David ...’

“Now Mary asked the angel, ‘How will this be since I am still a virgin?’

“And the angel said, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.’”

Now when Mary hears this invitation from Gabriel to participate in God's plan, God's dream for mankind, she is not thrilled. You would think that she would be. Actually, the Bible says that “Mary was deeply troubled by these words ...” This whole experience deeply troubled

her. And I think that it's easy for you and I to think, *Wow, it's a chance of a lifetime and you'll be known forever*, those sorts of things. We misunderstand Mary's experience and many of the lessons that we could learn in the Bible, because we spoil it by knowing how it ends. And we think they know how it ends, and they do not.

**Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.**

**--- Søren Kierkegaard**

Søren Kierkegaard, the philosopher, put it this way. "Life ..." – My life, your life, Mary's life – "... can only be understood backwards; but the problem is that we must live it forwards." That's the rub. We can see how God has worked and is working in my past. Look at all the miraculous things that He's done. And look how He's still healing me – awesome. But in the present, I feel very alone. In the future is where I spend all my worry dollars. That's where I spend my worry. That's what that's for.

### **Mary's Situation**

Mary's situation is this; that she is young, she's engaged, she's pregnant. Joseph knows he's not the father. This is how it works back in those days. The Torah, the Old Testament script, ruled. They just followed directions. And Joseph was directed that he would put her out – he would put her away. And so, this invitation from Gabriel is this; that she would be destitute; that she would be ostracized by her whole village; that this son that would be born would be, more than likely, labeled an illegitimate child. She would be excluded from the sacred assembly that she was used to. That's what's being asked of her.

Now, that's not what happens, and we know that. But she does not know that. Mary is a righteous young lady and she has righteous dreams and this is not the dream she had. And for her to accept this offer from Gabriel from God, she would have to put that dream aside and let it die.

**Mary began to suffer for Jesus before Jesus ever began to suffer for Mary.**

**--- John Ortberg**

John Ortberg put it nicely. He said this: “Mary began to suffer for Jesus before Jesus ever began to suffer for Mary.”

**Luke 1:38**

**“I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me as you have said.”**

Mary’s response is this. It’s stunning. “ ‘I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me as you have said.’ ” Let’s all say that together. “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me as you have said.”

Now for the rest of our time of learning together, this is going to be what’s called a responsive reading. And so, you Catholics and Lutherans and Episcopalians, you help us out. Every time you see this on the slides, you just say it out loud. That’s how you do it in those other churches, more formal churches. So, it’s going to be a responsive reading.

This is not the only time Mary prayed this particular prayer. It was the first time that we know about. Peace comes on the other side of this prayer. If you want this supernatural, inexplicable, unimaginable peace that Jesus left, you have to pray this prayer. You have to put down your dreams and say, “I am the Lord’s servant.” What dreams are you holding on to that would keep you from praying that prayer? What hopes do you have – they might be godly – that might not be from God? What keeps you from having the peace that God wants you to have? That’s the application for us to discuss today. I hope your soul is hearing the Spirit’s tug.

**Simeon**

Forty days after Jesus is born, Mary and Joseph and Jesus go from Bethlehem up the hill to Jerusalem where they do what you’re supposed to do at forty days after childbirth, and that is to give an offering, a praise offering, a dedication – that’s what it is, a dedication offering. And when they’re doing that, an old saint that has been living his whole life to hopefully live with the fulfillment of the promise that he was given in a dream, that he would not die before he saw the

Messiah. And he's going to see the Messiah. He's been awakened by the Spirit that morning and he is going and he greets Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. And he says ... here it is ... "I'd like to give a prayer for you." His name is Simeon. And he prays for Jesus and Mary and Joseph.

**Luke 2:35**

**"... and a sword will pierce your own soul too."**

And then at the end of the blessing, he turns and looks at Mary, just at Mary, and he says this: "... and a sword will pierce your own soul too." That does not sound like a blessing. That's a prophecy. What does that mean? What does it mean to bear that?

But Mary's attitude was *Nevertheless, let it be with me*. What do you suppose Mary's dreams may have been, dreams that she might have to give up?

### **Dream of Financial Strength**

Maybe that she would have financial strength, maybe just financial stability. I'm not talking about a big upgrade or anything, or just an ability to know that the bills were going to get paid. You'd think that would be true. That would be a lot of people's dreams, especially considering that she will be giving birth to the Messiah, she will raise this child as her own. Don't you think maybe?

But we find early on that that's not the case. Because even this story that we're telling right now of her dedication, when you go to have a baby dedication, when you're giving that sacrifice, the law says that you should give a lamb, a perfect lamb. But if you can't afford that lamb, if you're just not in that income bracket, then it can be available to you through two doves or two pigeons. Mary and Joseph don't have a lamb. They can't afford one. And today it would be like a high church, a fancy, more formal church where you christen a baby. It's very common that you would go out and spend good money to get a gown that only that baby would wear, and that would be its christening gown. And you would like to do that because it would show off. And it's a good thing, a spiritual thing, right? It's a spiritual activity. In this case, Mary couldn't buy that gown. Joseph couldn't afford it. They're borrowing someone else's – they got a hand-me-down or something.

We also know that they weren't all that well-to-do because they end up going back to Nazareth. Now I would think that they could hope to get a different zip code because Nazareth -- well, it's not my opinion -- someone says it in the Bible -- "Has anything good ever come from Nazareth?" It's maybe not a good part of the area. And that's where they're having to live. You'd think they'd get maybe some kind of better way of living life. The summary of this is that a mother and a father dream of what would be best for their child, that they could afford what that child would need. And this dream was not realized. And so, Mary would have to say, *That's a dream I'm going to have to leave right here*. And she'd have to pray this prayer.

Here, let's say that. "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me as you have said."

### **Dream of Safety and Security**

I bet Mary would have dreams of simple things like safety and security. That's not asking too much. That's a righteous thing to ask for, that your child and your family would be safe. But if you look at the story of Jesus, his early birthdays were not celebrated in His hometown of Nazareth. They were in Egypt. And the reason He was spending His birthdays in Egypt in His early years is because a murderous, paranoid, crazy King Herod wanted to kill every boy in that area because he was threatened by a newborn. And so, Mary had to put down her dream of safety. Some angel came to Joseph and said, "Put down that dream and run. Run for your life." Wow.

And then later on, in the life of Jesus when He's twelve years old, it says they took Him to Jerusalem on their annual pilgrimage. They took Him there and they lost Him. They left Him in Jerusalem. I think certainly one of parents' biggest fears is to leave their child somewhere, to forget where they put them last. In this event they leave him for three days. I can't imagine what those days were like.

We've lost children. I hate to say that -- not even a child, but children. I remember vividly that the first time we lost a child it was our son. We were downtown at a big Fourth of July parade. And at the end of the parade there was ice cream and hot dogs and all that sort of thing. And we lost our only child. And I remember eventually getting to the authority, saying, "Okay, look, here's how you'll pick him out. He's wearing red, white, and blue." And I didn't realize what I was saying until I heard myself saying it. I thought, *Oh, no*. We got him back -- I think we got him back. We left with a cute little boy that dressed in red, white, and blue. We raised that

one. But I was thinking back to how long it took to finally get to the point where we couldn't find him and went to the authorities. And I think it was a very long time, but honestly, it was more like eight minutes. But it was eight lifetimes if you've been a parent like that.

And Jesus is lost for three days – the Son of God. And we know that Joseph was the one who lost him because in the story of the gospels, you'll never hear of Joseph ever again. And we don't know if Mary actually killed Joseph or if she just looked at him with that look and his heart seized up and he died. And I can't imagine a worse way to enter heaven than to be Joseph. Can you imagine that he's working his way to the presence of God and every saint, every angel, is saying, "Joseph, you had one job. He was the Messiah." That little kid from The Simpsons – "Heh-heh." I don't think he made it to heaven, if I know cartoon characters. But if there is a bad part of heaven, Joseph is the mayor of the bad part of heaven. Well, I don't think that anything to do with our story, but it's entertaining to think about.

They get to the temple after three days of looking for him, and Mary speaks, not Joseph. And Mary says this: "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." And Jesus says this – no apology, not one whatsoever – he says, "Why were you searching for me? I was doing my Father's business." I wonder if that was a bit of a sword in the heart of Mary.

#### **Luke 2:51**

**Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.**

*Why are you so anxious? I'm just doing what I'm doing.* And then it says this. This is an interesting part of the story. "And then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But His mother treasured all these things in her heart." I bet she did. I wonder if she was thinking, *Was that what Simeon meant? Was that the sword in my heart?*

#### **Dream's for Her Son's Public Ministry**

I bet she had dreams about her son's ministry, His big plans. She's a mom. And when He starts His adult life and He's doing ministry, it is not going according to Mary's dreams. He is



doing things that she doesn't think He's supposed to be doing. I'm going to show you in a verse that you didn't think was in the Bible, but here's what Jesus was doing that leads to this sentence. He is violating the cultural expressions of the Sabbath. He is touching lepers, He is dining with tax collectors. He lets a prostitute wash His feet with her hair. The Pharisees – some of the Pharisees – that she was hoping would be liking Jesus had a hatred and a vitriol towards Jesus her son that they didn't even have towards Rome.

### **Mark 3:21**

**When His family heard about this, they went to take charge of Jesus, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”**

And so, Mary, the family, seized the ministry of Jesus, and they resolved this, Mark chapter 3, verse 21: “And when His family heard about this, they went to take charge of Jesus, for they said, ‘He is out of His mind.’” Mary's included in this. She's looking at the ministry of Jesus and they conclude that He's deluded. And they want to take charge of Jesus. Wow. You won't find that in passages in the Bible. Oh, let's see how that goes. So family – Mary and brothers of Jesus – they come and they are waiting outside and they're going to talk to Jesus. And Jesus is told this – this is what happens. “ ‘Your mother and brothers are outside and they're looking for you.’” And I'm thinking, *And your mom looks really mad!* And He says this: “ ‘Who is my mother and my brothers? And He looks at those seated around Him that He's teaching and He says this: ‘Here is my mother. This is my brothers and my sisters! Whoever does the will of God, that's my mother and my brother and my sisters.’”

That must have been a sword in Mary's soul. She thought she was doing the will of God. That is not what she was expecting. And so, here she is again, having to pray this prayer once again. “I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me ...”

### **Suffering Leads to Something More**

The suffering Mary experienced is incomparable. Who could possibly understand what she's had to endure? And here's an interesting perspective – why? Why all of this suffering? And I would say this – that there is a potential – to receive this supernatural kind of peace, we need to cry out. To receive the peace that transcends all understanding, to become like Christ in all of

life, to have this kind of peace, requires us to desire nothing else but that. In other words, life does things to make us want to drop our dreams so that we can pick up the dreams of God. The peace the world gives us is fine, but it's contingent. As long as there's limited suffering and there's not a lot of risk and the only people that die are really old, but they're healthy somehow and they do it in their sleep. It's like a golden retriever in front of the fireplace peace. That's the kind of peace the world gives. But this kind of peace, the peace that the Lord Jesus Christ leaves us? We are made for so much more than golden retriever peace. And the only way we can have the peace that Jesus has is on the other side of that prayer of Mary – is absolute, unequivocal, complete surrender. We drop our guard. We drop our everything. We drop all the things that we know. Suffering is required to unleash the potential of all that we have. Suffering is required to unleash the potential of all that God has for us to become like Christ.

In the deepest recesses of our souls, here's the thing. There is profound potential. It's just potential – profound potential. And it is released when we are challenged. It is released when we experience injustice, when we have a death of a dream. That's how it is drawn up. And whether or not we take advantage of that is another thing.

Let me explain this in a different way. C. S. Lewis writes a science fiction book called *Out of the Silent Planet*. It's part of space trilogy. And they're going to various planets, and the lead character goes to a planet that is unfallen, uncontaminated. There is no sin, there is no bent. It's paradise, mind you. And in the creation of this planet, the creator creates a Leviathan. It's unadulterated and yet it has this sea monster in it. And this water beast every year comes down from the waterfall and goes into the place where all the villagers live and tries to eat them. And so, the villagers, the men of the village, rise up and they hunt this killer beast. And sometimes the Leviathan is killed early. Sometimes he will take a man or kill men. So, in an interview, a person that's visiting this paradise planet says, "How can there be death and suffering and risk if this is a perfect planet?"

**“And I say also this. I do not think the forest would be so bright, nor the water so warm, nor love so sweet, if there were no danger in the lakes.”**

And this is what the head hunter says: “And I say this. I do not think the forest would be so bright, nor the water be so warm, nor love so sweet, if there were no danger in our lakes.” There’s something about the difficult times in life that force us into a place to want and need more.

We have to cry out to God, and God says, “I’m listening, but you’re going to have to put those dreams down. The only way you can experience the presence of my spirit and the peace that comes with that is if you surrender everything, all those hopes and dreams.”

### **The Cross**

To understand this next section, men, you need to know this, and some of you ladies. Know this – every mother, regardless of the age of their child, sees that man or woman as a child – always. They are always their little baby – especially when they’re suffering or when they’re in pain. And if Mary had any dream left, if she was holding onto anything by the time Jesus comes to the cross, she’s put that down. Because in the arrest and the execution of her little boy, she had to give that up. It wasn’t going to happen.

It says in the Bible that near the cross of Jesus stood Mary. And when Mary saw what was happening, you need to see it with her eyes. When she saw that body of Jesus, that one that was promised by an angel from God, that she carried in her womb and she gave birth to, that she nursed as that little baby boy, that she changed him and fed him and clothed him – that baby Jesus, that little boy. That body that was beaten with lashes and nailed upon a cross that He might die slowly – that’s what she saw and she saw those soldiers take a sword and pierce His heart and then it hit – “... and the sword shall pierce your heart also.” Her little boy, taken down and put in a grave that didn’t even belong to Him.

If you live long enough and if you love deep enough, there is a sword that will pierce your soul. Love will bring about unbearable pain. That’s what it is to be human and that’s what it is to love. And you’re going to love someone and they’re going to find themselves in a place and

you will do anything to help them. But it won't matter. You're going to love someone and they're going to find themselves in a situation where you would give everything to make it all well. And you don't have enough because there isn't enough. And you're going to need peace. Not golden retriever peace. You're going to need supernatural, inexplicable, undeniable, miraculous peace, the peace that Jesus left, the peace that Jesus gave. And you're going to have to pray this prayer. It's the only prayer you can pray. "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me as you said."

That peace that Jesus offers is on the other side of that prayer. What dream could you possibly be holding onto that would keep you from this peace? Now this peace – I'm not talking about you just wanting it desperately enough. I'm not talking about modern expressions of stoicism where you just don't care that much and so you don't get hurt that much. This is you praying, "Oh God, oh God, dear God, I've got to have something that's bigger than the misery that I'm in." And God says, "Yeah. But you're going to have to put some things down if you want to hold this kind of peace."

And the source of this peace is able to give you inexplicable tranquility and serenity, because the God of the cross is the God of the resurrection. And the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is the Spirit that you receive upon faith. And He says, "All is well." For God so loved you that He gave you a much greater dream.

### **Romans 8:28**

**And we know that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.**

Could you consider putting down the superficial, shallow, temporal hopes, that you might receive and believe this promise in the Bible? "And we know that God works all things together for the good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose." What dream could you possibly have that would keep you from believing that promise?

Here's the burden. Full disclosure. Here's what Gabriel was actually asking Mary to do. This is what was ultimately the expense. This is the summation of all the little swords that would pierce her soul. Gabriel could have said this: *Mary, this is what is asked of you, that you would be ultimately and absolutely unique. There has never been and there will never be anyone that*

*can relate to you, and you will never relate to other people. You are the mother of Jesus and no one will understand your story.*

She can't go to Old Testament saints like Ruth and Esther or Joseph, Moses, David, or Daniel. None of those men or women could say, *Oh, I understand*. This is the sword – absolute, complete aloneness. She's not the last unicorn -- she's the only one. She is not like anything else, like anyone else. Even mothers in the past that have had miraculous conceptions that we talked about last week like Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel, and even her aunt Elizabeth – those births, those children that were given as miracles from God, saved those women from the shame that they were in and they celebrated that. And some people could never understand how that happened in their old age, but that brought them honor and they danced about it and they couldn't wait to explain how God did this to them.

That's not Mary's story. This conception did not bring her honor; it brought her shame. She could never explain how that happened. We still don't believe it, many people. Mary's alone. *Mary, you will be alone. That's what I'm asking you to do. And Mary, I will work all things together for good because you love me and you are called according to my purpose. Will you do this? You better brace yourself.*

And she said this: "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me as you have said." God's peace, His supernatural serenity, simply put, is an effect of a dream exchange. It's a consequence of trading up.

Let me give you a story that you already know, just to illustrate how this works. This time of year, I watch happy movies because I have to, and one happy movie I watch every year so I can make it is *It's a Wonderful Life*. I'm going to spoil some endings here. If you haven't seen it yet, that's entirely your fault. You've had your entire life to watch it, no matter how old you are.

It's the story of George Bailey and his great big dreams. His dream his whole life – as a child he had great big dreams that he was going to travel. He was going to see the world. His passport was going to be filled with stamps. He was going to live out of a suitcase. One thing's for sure – he was never going to be tied down to Bedford. That was his dream. And with all of his business skills – oh yeah, he had dreams of designing buildings, of planning cities, not like a neighborhood. That's for sure. George Bailey didn't have time – he didn't have dreams of marriage and children, because he was going to be too busy. And the point of the movie is this:

with every single act there's a choice for George Bailey to put down his dreams to take on the director's, God's, dreams for his life. And he gets to the end, the culmination, of all that, and he never got to live out his dreams and it wasn't working out for him, and so he prayed a prayer to God Almighty. He said, "God, I wished I had never lived." And that's what the story is about. *Really, George? Here's what life would be like if you had never lived.* George didn't know that every time he put down one of his dreams, he was picking up a better dream. And so, the last scene is this: that George Bailey was condemned to live out the dreams of the ultimate narrator. And that life was a wonderful life, better than he could ever ask or imagine.

So, Mary ... it's been 2,000 years now. And the sword did pierce your very soul too. And all those dreams that you set down and watched die. So, how was that life? *Oh*, Mary says, *It was a wonderful life.* It came on the other side of multiple prayers: "I am the Lord's servant."

Would you pray that prayer with me? This Christmas could be your life-changing Christmas where the gift you long for is the peace of God that transcends all understanding. And it's for you on the other side of this prayer. Let's pray.

*I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me as you have said, O YHWH God. Lord, I pray that we would pray that prayer. Lord, I'd ask that Your Spirit would speak to us about what dream that we could possibly grasp and cling to that would have such value that we wouldn't leave it. And it might even be a godly dream, not even selfish ambition, but just godly dreams. I'd ask that Your Spirit speak to us, Lord, that we might get rid of that. Lord, we're choosing this morning that we would rather play a very small part in Your dream for Your purpose in life than for You to play a part in our dream and our purpose in life. We will not use You. You will use us. Use me. I am the Lord's servant. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*