

CHRISTMAS SURPRISES: GOD'S PLAN **(Luke 1:5-38; Matthew 1:18-25)**

Much of what takes place in life requires a plan. Consider some “for instances.” Have you ever made a vacation plan, a financial plan, a retirement plan? If you have ever been a coach, you must have worked on a game plan. Have you ever planned a party, a wedding, a funeral? In every church, business, school, and family, somebody has to do calendar planning so that two different things aren't scheduled for the same time or at the same place. As employees, as students, and as individuals, we are more organized and productive when we use a day planner where we record where we need to be, what we need to do, and when things are to happen.

What about God? Do you think He plans? Or does He just wing it? Do you think God makes up things on fly? No. The Scriptures clearly teach that God plans.

We read in Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD . . .” In Psalm 33, the psalmist contrasts the plans of man with the plans of God. In the NLT, v. 10 begins, “The LORD shatters the plans of the nations,” and v. 11 proclaims, “But the LORD's plans stand firm forever.”

What was God doing before Genesis 1:1? What was He doing before He created the heavens and the earth? I think He was planning. He planned everything that we would one day see with our Hubble telescope before He created it. He planned everything we would eventually study under our electron microscope before He created it. Before He created life, He planned the double helix structure of DNA. Before He created man, He knew man would sin, and He planned how He would redeem fallen man.

We read in Revelation 13:8, again from the NLT that Jesus was “the Lamb who was killed before the world was made.” In other words, before God ever said, “Let there be light,” He purposed, He planned to send His Son to die for those He was yet to create. Redemption happened according to His plan. Do you remember what Peter said to the crowd that assembled on the Day of Pentecost? Peter preached, “. . . this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23).

God acts according to what He has planned, but we are not always privy to God's plans. Sometimes, God surprises us by what He does. We didn't see it coming.

Two weeks ago, we began looking at Christmas Surprises. We began with God's promises concerning the Child-King. Surprisingly, God sent out a birth announcement for the birth of His Son more than 700 years before Jesus was born. Through the pen of Isaiah, we were told one was coming who would bring light to those living in darkness. He would bear upon His shoulders the burden of government. He would be a child born and a Son given to us. He would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Those are surprising promises.

Today, our focus will be upon God's plan. That first Christmas, there were two couples who were caught up in God's plan. Their names were Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary. To say they were surprised by what God was doing in and through them is understatement. We are going to see how they illustrate four truths.

The Announcement of God's Plan Was Unexpected

Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph were all recipients of an angelic message. Zechariah and Mary were both visited by the same angel, Gabriel. Joseph had dream in which an angel spoke to him. We are not told the name of the angel. He is simply referred to as "an angel of the Lord."

Let's start with Zechariah. Time will not allow me to expound on everything I would like to say; so, let me just read the story of how he and his wife were part of God's surprising plan. Follow in your Bible as I read Luke 1:5-25.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth believed that having a child of their own was a possibility that had passed them long ago. They had to be content with serving the Lord however they could for whatever time they had left. That all changed when Gabriel came with a message from God.

Basically, Gabe said, "Zach, I've got some good news. Your wife Liz is going to have a baby, your baby. It's going to be a boy. You are to name him John, and John's going to be a present-day Elijah. He's going to prepare the way for the Messiah to come."

Zechariah was blessed to hear such astounding and unexpected news, but I wonder, how did Elizabeth learn she was going to have a child? Her husband couldn't tell her with words. He was mute. He couldn't speak. Even though he could probably write, it is doubtful that Elizabeth could read. Most people were illiterate, and the few who could read were most likely men. Teaching girls to read was not a high priority in that day.

Elizabeth couldn't deduct that she was pregnant because she missed her period. She hadn't had a cycle in years. She couldn't go to the local pharmacy to buy a pregnancy test kit. That hadn't been invented yet.

I suppose Zechariah tried to use sign language. That would have been comical . . . Eventually, Elizabeth began to show. She understood what her husband had been trying to tell her. Just imagine the tears of joy she would have shed.

About six months later, Gabriel came down on another mission with another message, but this time, it was for a female who was much younger, much, much younger. Let's look at Luke 1:26-38.

Mary must have been staggered to hear that God had chosen her for such a special mission and to give birth to such a special child. Of the billions and billions of women who had ever lived or would ever live, she was the only one who would ever be given such an assignment from God.

Mary was not married, but she was engaged. She had the unenviable task of telling Joseph, her intended, as to what was going to happen. I imagine Joseph stopped listening when he heard Mary say the words, "I'm pregnant." His mind must have reeled with the news. Instead of walking away, he might have run away.

Let's read what happened next. It is recorded for us in Matthew 1:18-25. Before going to bed that night, Joseph resolved to divorce Mary because in that culture, engagement carried a legal status. Out of compassion, he would divorce her quietly. He didn't want to drag Mary's reputation through the mud any more than it would be anyway. As Joseph slept fitfully, an angel came to Joseph in a vision or a dream affirming the truth of what was happening and with the instruction to take Mary as his wife but not to have relations with her until after she had given birth to God's offspring.

As I compare these four people to one another, I find they all have one striking thing in common. It had to do with their character. In Matthew 1:19 we are told that Joseph was a just man. Luke 1:6 says that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, and they walked blamelessly. The angel Gabriel told Mary that she had found favor with God (Luke 1:30), and Elizabeth said of Mary, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45).

All four of these individuals were people who leaned into the Lord. They trusted Him. They sought to do the right thing, the godly thing. If you want to be used by God in a blessed and significant way, you must trust Him and obey Him.

The 11th chapter of Hebrews is known as the Hall of Faith. In that chapter, the author of Hebrews lists people who had distinguished themselves in their service to God. Each time he writes, “By faith, so and so did such and such.” Each person trusted God and then they demonstrated that trust by what they did.

If you are a person of faith and obedience, you can expect God to do the unexpected in and through you.

The Response to God’s Plan Was Expected

Knowing what we know about each person, what they did in response to God’s call was pretty much what we might have guessed.

Zechariah expressed some doubt. Wouldn’t you have done the same? If you are beyond child-bearing years, and your spouse is beyond child-bearing years, and you were to be told, “You two are going to have a child,” what would you say? Maybe you would say something like . . .

- Get out of town.
- What you talkin’ about?
- Am I on Candid Camera?

I think you would be a bit skeptical, to say the least.

Zechariah was, and he paid a price for that. He was unable to speak for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Can you imagine being the recipient of such wonderful news, and you lack the ability to tell anybody?

I can think of one thing worse—to be given good news and choosing not to tell anybody. That is what we have done with the good news of Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection.

Mary’s response was quite different. Although both she and Zechariah asked a question starting with the word “how,” the substance of their question was different. Zechariah’s *how* was born of doubt while Mary’s *how* was born of confusion. She knew enough about biology and the facts of life to realize she wasn’t a candidate for motherhood. She hadn’t been with a man. When Gabriel told her how it would take place, she voiced her “yes” of faith. Basically, she said, “OK. Count me in.” She was onboard with what God chose to do through her.

Are you more like Zechariah or more like Mary? When some people read a promise from God’s word, they fold their hands and say, “Prove it. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

They act like they were born in Missouri. Missouri is called the “Show Me” state.

This past week I researched how Missouri came to be known as the Show Me state. There are different stories offered, but the one I like most attributes the phrase to Missouri’s U.S. Congressman Willard Duncan Vandiver. He served in United States House of Representatives from 1897 to 1903. On one occasion, he gave a speech in which he said, “I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me.”

Some people, like Zechariah, want God to show them. We need to remember that it is not God’s job to convince us. It is our job to obey Him. As we obey Him, we begin to see the wisdom, and beauty, and joy of God’s plan.

One of my favorite characters in the Christmas story is Joseph. Poor Joseph doesn’t get much attention. We talk more about the angels, the shepherds, and even the Wise Men than we do Joseph. One reason we likely don’t say much about Joseph is that Joseph didn’t say much. In fact, the Bible does not record a single thing Joseph ever said. Zechariah may have been mute for nine months, but the Bible treats Joseph as if he was mute for his entire life. We are not told of anything Joseph said to God or Mary or the angel or the shepherds or the Wise Men or to Jesus. He truly was the strong, silent type.

Joel Gregory said of Joseph that he was remarkably simple and simply remarkable. He was simply remarkable in his obedience to God. While the Bible does not record what Joseph said, it does tell us what Joseph did. We read in Matthew 1:24, “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him . . .”

May our prayer be, “Lord, help me to be like Joseph. Help me to be immediate in my obedience.” Immediate obedience should be our goal.

There is a third common element as to how God dealt with Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph.

The Assurance of God’s Plan Was Expectant

I believe God routinely sprinkles words of assurance to us whenever He calls us to join Him in what He is doing. While Zechariah was struck mute as a negative consequence of his initial doubt, he was told this condition was only temporary. He was assured that his speech would return once God fulfilled what He had promised.

As a means of encouraging Mary, Gabriel told her of the miracle baby that her relative Elizabeth was carrying. And, he reminded Mary that nothing is impossible with God. That is something we need to remind ourselves of from time-to-time.

God assured Joseph through the angel that it was okay to take Mary as his wife, that she had not been unfaithful to Him. He was told who this Son would be and what He would accomplish on behalf of God’s people.

I enjoy watching sports. I enjoy it more when my teams win. I’ve been a lifelong Dallas Cowboys fan; so, this season has not been particularly joyous.

While I may begin watching a game, sometimes, my responsibilities keep me from watching the entire game. When that is the case, I usually record the game to watch later. Usually, before I sit down to see what I have recorded, I will check the internet to see who won. I have decided that I don’t want to waste three hours watching something that

is only going to depress me. But if my team won, I will happily sit down to see how it all turned out. If I know my team won, I won't get upset when we fumble the ball or throw an interception. It's OK because the end result is good.

Brothers and sisters, I have read the last book of the Bible. There are some bad things that are going to happen and are happening, but it's OK because the end result is good. God and His people win. It is not too late to join the winning side.

In addition to the last few chapters of the Bible, God has sprinkled assurances throughout Scripture that are meant to encourage and strengthen us. We often call those assurances "promises."

The great Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson once said, "The future is as bright as the promises of God."

Get to know the promises of God. Trust them. You will be able to look to the future with great expectancy.

The Obedience to God's Plan Was Exceptional

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph were all given jobs to do. You might think that Zechariah's job was the easiest, but aged Zechariah didn't just father a child, he was a father to John. Much of what John became could be attributed to the fathering influence of his dad. Zechariah nurtured his son in the faith.

Elizabeth and Mary both bore miracle children, and they mothered those children with love and care.

Joseph endured the rumors that swirled about concerning whose baby it really was that Mary carried and bore. He, like Zechariah, was an exemplary father in caring for, guiding, and protecting his family. He even taught Jesus the trade of being a carpenter which Jesus was until He began His public ministry.

All four did what they did in obedience to God's call upon their lives.

Whether you realize it or not, God has placed a call upon your life. I can boil down God's call upon your life with two simple statements. **First, God has called you to know Him.** He wants you to develop a close, intimate relationship with Him through His Spirit who indwells you. As you read God's word, the Spirit of God will minister truth to your heart. He will use the Scripture to encourage you, to warn you, to challenge you, to convict you, and to grow you. As you pray, God's Spirit will lead you in knowing who to pray for, what to pray, and even when to pray. And when you don't know what to pray, the Spirit will even intercede on your behalf. God wants you to know Him.

Second, God Has called you to make Him known. Our relationship with God through Jesus Christ was never meant to be only a personal, private affair. We are to be public with our faith.

When you meet someone new, it doesn't take long to learn about where that person lives, what he or she does for a living, if they are married and how many children they have, etc., etc. When a person meets us for the first time, it shouldn't take them long to learn that we love Jesus, what Jesus has done for us, what Jesus means to us, and what Jesus can do for them.

Are you getting to know Jesus? And, are you making Him known in the circles of

your influence?

The author Richard Foster once wrote: “To applaud the will of God, to do the will of God, even to fight for the will of God is not difficult . . . until it comes at cross-purposes with our will. Then the lines are drawn.”

What would have happened if Zechariah had said, “I don’t want to be a father in my old age. Find someone younger”?

And can you imagine Mary saying, “God, I’m too young. Find somebody older”?

Suppose Joseph had said, “I’m too poor and too busy. Find somebody more affluent. Find somebody else.”

Christmas tells us that God has a plan, and He wants you in on it. Say “yes” to Him. You’ll be glad you did, and the world will be blessed that you did.