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Blessings in Disguise

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With hands tied behind his back, JW Tucker was brutally beaten with broken bottles. After being tortured along with 60 of his Christian compatriots, their captors threw them into the river to be eaten alive by crocodiles. It wasn't Isis or Al Qaeda who claim responsibility. The attack took place on November 24, 1964 at the hands of Congolese rebels. I heard this story on Thanksgiving night. Our family gathered around the fireplace and listened to a sermon that my father-in-law preached on February 21, 1979. He was 36 years old and part of what made that sermon so powerful was it was the first time some of the grandchildren had ever heard their grandfather's voice. Our natural instinct when we hear a story like that is to feel sorry for JW Tucker whose earthly life was seemingly cut short but life can't be cut short when it lasts for all eternity. His wife lost a husband, his three children lost a father but heaven gained a hero. A hero in a long genealogy of heroes that trace back to the first Christian martyr, a man by the name of Stephen and if we could covet in heaven, we would Covet the martyrs reward.

In the grand scheme of God's good, pleasing and perfect will, eternal gain infinitely offsets earthly pain. God does not promise us happily ever after. He promises us much more than that, happily forever after. And it was that eternal perspective that inspired JW Tucker to risk his earthly life for the gospel. Tucker didn't fear death because he had already died to himself. It wasn't an uncalculated risk that JW Tucker took when he went into the Congo during a civil war. He counted the cost with his missionary friend Morris Plotts. Plotts tried to convince his friend not to go. 'If you go in, you won't come out.' To which JW Tucker responded, 'God didn't tell me I had to come out, He only told me that I had to go in.' That's the kind of obedience that changes the course of history.

It is not about coming out with an album, it is about going into the studio and laying down tracks. It is not about going into the bank and getting a loan, it is about going in with a business plan. It is not about coming out of the general election winning the popular vote, it is about throwing your hat in the ring. In the kingdom of God, it is not about success or failure, it is obedience whenever, wherever, whatever. And I think that's what I admire most about a teenage girl named Mary.

Luke 1:26

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

Let me ask a question this weekend. Who wants to be blessed? Every hand went up including mine. If we did a word association test and I said blessing, most of us think health, wealth and happiness. It is an Americanized interpretation but that is not what it means. As our team that went to Greece this past week can attest for refugees who are coming across the border, it is

more like food, shelter and safety. But at the end of the day, blessing is not a material thing. Blessing is a spiritual thing. Blessing is being in the center of God's good, pleasing and perfect will.

Here's the deal, the will of God is not an insurance plan, it is a dangerous plan. At the end of the day, the will of God is the glory of God. And I've discovered that in failure and success, in good times and in bad times, in life and death that there is a way to glorify God, and that is the will of God.

You've heard me say this a hundred times and you'll hear me say it again, the blessings of God will complicate your life. Sin will complicate your life in negative ways but the blessings of God will complicate your life in positive ways. When Lora and I got married, it complicated our lives! Thank God for 23 years of complications! And we have three complications that we named Parker, Summer and Josiah and I cannot imagine my life without those complications! Success will complicate your life. We all want the promotion but let me tell you what that means. It means you will get to make more difficult decisions and you will get to make decision that no one else wants to make. And you get to carry the collective weight of the organization on your shoulders. So go ahead and pray for the promotion but count the cost. It is epitomized biblically by the parable of the talents. The reward for good work in the kingdom of God is not an all-expense paid vacation. It is not even an early retirement. In the kingdom, the reward for good work is more work. It is going to get harder and more complicated. And that means you are blessed. Blessed art thou among women. Seriously? Pregnant, out of wedlock, conceived by the Holy Ghost, that is not how we script our lives. That is not how we script blessed. What we want is love at first sight. We want the wedding dress. We want the destination wedding. We want the romantic honeymoon. We don't script a donkey ride to Bethlehem. We don't script no room in the inn. We don't script the manger. And we don't script Mary and Joseph becoming refugees themselves and fleeing to Egypt in the middle of the night. What I'm getting at is I'm not sure we would call Mary blessed in our culture. Perhaps the exact opposite. But I would submit that in God's kingdom she is highly favored because she is chosen to carry the Son of God, to raise the Son of Man. I can't imagine a more difficult or more important job. And that is the blessing.

What I'm getting at is God's blessings are usually blessings in disguise. They don't usually look like blessings or feel like blessings out of the gate. But they are.

God has blessings for you in categories that you don't even know exist. Verse 30

*<sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> 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>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

We suffer from something calling hindsight bias. Because we know how this story ends, it is very difficult for us to have a perspective of what's happening right here but at face value, if you could forget what you know, if you are Mary and you here these words, you are thinking that you son will eventually become the President of the United States. He is going to take the throne of his father David. Mary is thinking in political categories, not spiritual categories. Stick with me.

In a city like Washington DC, we do the same thing. I want to honor everybody that works in the political arena. I believe it is a noble calling and we honor you, but the solution to our greatest problems is not political, it is spiritual. That does not mean that we disengage from politics but I am of the persuasion that the gospel is the good news and that the church is the hope of the world. It is when the church fails to do its job that the government has to do our job for us. So it is our job to care for orphans and widows. It is our job to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless. What does that have to do with this story? Well, this sounds like a political solution. Your Son will take the throne of his father David, but Jesus' life is not pointed towards a Roman throne, it is pointed towards a Roman cross. He isn't solving their political problems which are very real under Roman rule, He is solving a much deeper problem, the sin problem. I am a sinner in need of a Savior. I can't help but wonder if Mary had flashbacks to this promise when Jesus is nailed to the cross. Why God? You promised and now He is dead! It made no sense. But death couldn't hold Him down. And the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in us and that was the objective! Not a political solution but a spiritual solution. He wasn't winning an election, He was winning redemption for humankind.

When I say that God has blessings for you in categories that you don't even know exist, I mean a couple of things. First of all, God is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine. What that means is that the logical constraints of your left brain are not able to wrap themselves around the good works, the good things, that God has prepared for you. So there are blessings in categories beyond your ability to imagine but I also mean that God often blesses us in ways that don't seem like a blessing. And that is when you have to hang in there and then hang in there a little longer and then hang in there some more.

Let me jump back one verse. Verse 29

*<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and cast in her mind what kind of greeting this might be.*

I like this little phrase 'cast in her mind.' In other words, Mary is holidazed. I had to work that in! She is dazed and confused and wouldn't you be? There is no category for what this angel just told her. She cast in her mind, it is the Greek work and one translation means argument. Anybody ever have an argument with God? I've had more than one and here's what I've learned, if you win an argument with God, you lose, and if you lose an argument with God, you win. The miracle that you are looking for is on the other side of a losing argument. For many of us, the miracle would be us losing the argument so that God's plans and purposes could be unveiled and unleashed in our lives.

I don't have time to extrapolate but when I look at the turning points in my life, it is amazing how many of them are just on the other side of an argument that I lost with God. You can argue a thousand things with God but at some point you have to determine if the logic of your human mind going to be the determining factor in what you discern to be right or wrong, or is Scripture the final authority?

It seems to me like Mary loses an argument here. She says be it unto me and You have said. Most of us flip this. We want God to fulfill our purposes for our life and we have some purposes for God too. But Mary is saying not my will but Thy will be done.

This Greek word that means cast in your mind also means to reason thoroughly and to consider carefully and to think deeply. I think this is a good moment to interject something. A recent survey by the Bureau of Labor found that 83 percent of Americans spend no time relaxing or thinking. Zero. Wow! We are so busy producing or consuming, no down time, no dreaming, no meditating, no margin. Corrie Ten Boom said if the devil can't make you bad he will make you busy. But Mary took the time and the effort to think this thing through. She cast it in her mind. And it is not the only time. Luke 2:19 says Mary pondered these things in her heart.

Zoom out a little bit. Henry David Thoreau skipped stones on Walden Pond. Alexander Graham Bell had what he called his dreaming place. It was a hollow of trees that overlooked the Grand River. George Washington Carver used to get up at 4:00am and take walks through the woods. Thomas Edison had a thinking chair. He would sit in the chair with a metal ball bearing in each hand and relax and eventually doze off and that when the metal ball would fall and wake him up and he would go back to working on one of his 1,093 patents. You need a dreaming place or a thinking chair. You need a prayer closet. You need a gratitude journal. It takes all of these different forms, but somehow, some way, without that margin in our lives, we will miss miracles right and left.

Here's what I admire about Mary, in psychology there is something called the confirmation bias. Many of you may be familiar with it. Simply put, we tend to interpret information in a way that confirms our preconceptions. We explain away anything that we can't explain or disagree with. If it doesn't fit in our paradigm we don't let it in. It is a confirmation bias and it plays out in thousands of different ways but since the Packers play the Cowboys this weekend, last year the Packers beat the Cowboys in the playoffs and some of you may remember that there was a play where Bryant caught a pass, or did he? After instant replay, the ruling on the field of a catch was reversed to an incompletion and I don't think I'm even going out on a limb right here, every Cowboy fan in the country believed it was a catch! And every Packers fan in the country knew it was incomplete! We see what we are looking for! We have a confirmation bias. And this has huge implications theologically. The Pharisees, they were looking for the Messiah. No one anticipated his birth or knew the Old Testament prophecies as well as they did. But Jesus didn't fit the profile that they were looking for. They weren't looking for a Messiah born in a manger. They weren't looking for a Messiah to come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. They weren't looking for a Messiah who washed feet or ate with sinners or healed on the Sabbath. And it was their confirmation bias that caused them to miss the Messiah and to miss the miracle.

We want God on our terms but you don't get God that way. You get God in his terms. And there is something about this moment in history that obviously changes history. Mary could have so easily said it doesn't work that way. Nothing about this made sense. Yet here was a teenage girl who didn't just cast in her mind what manner of greeting this might be. Verse 38

<sup>38</sup> *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."*

Wow! Maybe your teenagers are just like this? No? No wonder she is chosen. The level of faith and the level of trust, I think most of us want a money-back guarantee but that takes faith out of the equation. We want God to reveal the second step before we take the first step. We want the entire game plan before the first play. We pray, God give us this year our yearly bread. We want a situation that doesn't require faith. We want it to make sense to us. But it is past our ability to fully understand the omniscient One. And He works in strange and mysterious ways, like conceiving his Son in the womb of a virgin. It is unbelievable but that's why it takes faith!

We love Jeremiah 29:11

*For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.*

But we ignore the verse that precedes it.

*When 70 years are completed for Babylon.*

Bible scholars have a couple different interpretations of what this means. One is a literal 70 years. The last deportation of Jewish refugees to Babylon took place in 586 BC. 70 years later, 516 BC, the temple is rebuilt. The other interpretation is that it is figurative. 70 years in the Jewish mindset referred to a lifetime. But either way, it puts this text into context. Does God have plans to prosper you? Does God have plans to give you hope and a future? Yes, yes and yes! But it might take 70 years. It might take a lifetime. And that seems like an eternity to us. But in light of eternity, it is about as long as the dash between the birthdate and the death date on a tombstone. Mary says be it unto me according to Thy word. It is a declaration. It is a resolution. Honestly, it reminds me of JW Tucker, God didn't tell me I had to come out, He only told me I had to go in.

Here's the rest of the story. Two days after JW Tucker's death, Belgian paratroopers rescued the rest of the family. An Air Force C130 airlifted the Tuckers back to America. JW's wife grieved beyond words but she gave God the sacrifice of praise. At about 20,000 feet, she prayed this prayer. She said, "I closed my eyes and prayed, O Father, I thank Thee for Thy goodness in many blessings. Thou hast delivered us out of the lion's den. We praise Thee and thank Thee for it and we ask that You would take J's life which has been laid down and use it for Thy honor and for Thy glory." For 30 years it seemed like the sacrifice was all for naught but it wasn't. The middle flowed through the middle of an unreached people group. During a season of civil unrest, the king appealed for help the Congolese government sent a man known as the Brigadier. The Brigadier was a policeman that JW Tucker had won to the Lord two months before he was killed. His efforts to share the gospel with the tribe were to no avail until he discovered an ancient tribal tradition that said if the blood of any man flows in this river, you must listen to his message. The Brigadier gathered the village elders and said, 'Some time ago a man was killed and his body was thrown into your river and the crocodiles in this river ate him up. His blood flowed in your river. Before he died, he lent me a message, this message concerned God's Son Jesus Christ who came to this world to save sinners. He died for the sins of the world. He died for my sins and I received this message and it changed my life.' That night several members of that tribe got on their knees and surrendered their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Since that day, thousands

of those people have put their faith in Jesus Christ and there are dozens of churches in that region because of a man whose blood flowed in that river. It is not for naught. Every prayer will be answered and every sacrifice will be honored. Every good deed will be rewarded. Every seed of faith will bear fruit. But it starts with our obedience. It starts with whatever, whenever, wherever. It starts with be it unto me according to Thy will.

Let's pray.

Lord we thank You for a reminder that there is a sovereign God who governs the affairs of men. He is still seated on his throne. He who began a good work will carry it to completion. Lord I know there are many this weekend who are already holidayed, confused, frustrated, wondering if and when You are going to show up. Things have happened this year that perhaps will never be explained. But God like Mary, help us to make a decision to put our full trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. In our heart we plan our course but there is a God who orders our footsteps. Lord I pray for the person that needs to lose an argument this weekend. May they have the courage, even when it doesn't make sense, to surrender their lives to You and to say be it unto me according to Thy will. Amen.

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