

Taking The Christmas Story Beyond Christmas

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'm going to ask us the same question as we start the years that Michiel asked earlier. How many have made New Year's resolutions or promises to do things better than before?

You know, your typical New Year's resolutions. Everyone, we've finished with those. We tried them when we were young, you know, it didn't work. Let's not make promises we can't keep.

Well, I thought, well, I'm going to give it a go. And I'm going to start working out. And so, just to get fit and get healthier and get stronger.

So I downloaded a program that looks like this. This is a five-week workout challenge. And boy, it's got the works. I think do this and you'll become Ironman.

You can't see it, but it starts with 20 squats, five bridges. I don't know what that is. Ten lunges. I think I know what that is.

[0 : 5 7] As long as it comes with a sword. A hundred bicycle crunches. Thirty planks and twenty leg raises. That's just on the first day. And it goes up and onwards from there.

Now, that was already at the start of the year. We're one week in. We had such lovely weather. The furthest I got was to go for lovely walks in the evening. So I've changed my workout platen already.

This is what it looks like now. This is... Is it the ab madness? March. Ab madness. March.

Oh, it says 2013, I think. I mean, that's how long ago that one was used. But that one looks a lot easier. Just a couple of push-ups, etc., etc. But, you know, we all make these promises.

And we all say we're going to do things. And then we always struggle to do them, don't we? And so as we look ahead into 2024, it's a good place to look ahead.

[2 : 0 0] But we're going to do a little bit of both. We're going to look ahead and look behind at the same time. What are we going to experience? How are we going to experience 2024? What's in store for us?

And can we trust God to see us through? And I want to take one last look, in a sense, at the Christmas story, related but unrelated to our series.

I don't think I'm going to cover anything about dragons quite in this talk. But I just want to see one last look at the Christmas story to see how it can help us trust God more in 2024.

And we'll see that it's all about how God makes and keeps His promises to us. And so the first point that I want to make as we look at our text together, just keep it open there in Luke chapter 1, is that God's promises always come true.

Not like us that make promises and then we get halfway and we just can't. For whatever reason. God makes promises and He keeps them. The Christmas story is proof that God is true to His promise about making a change to the way that the world was going.

[3 : 09] We need to see the Christmas story as a start of something new but also as a fulfillment of something old. And so you'll notice in Luke chapter 1, the text says, the Lord will give him, in verse 32 and 33, it talks about the Lord giving this son that's going to be born that they must call Jesus, the Lord will give him the throne of His father David and of His kingdom there will be no end.

I know it says a few other words there but that's the import of that. And as we saw in our Old Testament reading, those promises come straight out of 2 Samuel chapter 7.

Made to King David, who was alive 1,000 years before Jesus was born. And so God's promises are of old.

When He makes His promises, it's not something new that He does. These are ancient promises and so they carry weight, deep weight, and because they're so old, they can assure us, yes, God is going to do what He says He's going to do.

But because they are old, there's also an element of mystery about them. The thing about God's timing is that He makes them come true in His timing.

[4 : 32] Making His promises a reality is not the same as ours. Or at least God's timing in making His promises a reality is not the same as our sense of timing. If you had to, we don't do this now, but if you turn over to Luke 4 and if you see in Matthew 1, there's this long list of genealogies of where Jesus comes from, His biological parents, if you want to put it that way.

And when you go through those genealogies, there's centuries where it looks like nothing was happening. Name after name after name and in the middle of nowhere, they didn't know who was coming next.

They might have forgotten the promises of the Messiah. They're just living their life, getting on with life, but in the background, God is working and using them in an unbroken chain to bring Christ into the world.

I think what's needed then for us as His people today is to trust in God and to trust in His timing for our lives as we look ahead to 2024.

The Christmas story looks back in time and says God is there the whole way, always working behind the scenes, down through the centuries to make His promises true.

[5 : 55] But at times, it will seem like there's nothing happening. I don't know about you how your 2023 was, but I know most of us.

And if we look back, we see that many of us went through very difficult times this last year. Many of us lost our closest family members.

Many of us struggled with really big, really big family issues. Many struggled with issues at work. Or, we just look around us at the world, at the problems of the world, the wars that started in Europe and now the Middle East.

Not to mention the earthquakes and, oh, there were some bad things happening last year. But, we look back and we think, well, how has God been working?

Well, the Christmas story says, well, God does work when we can't see Him working. The proof of that is Christ. A thousand years of promises.

[7 : 03] And of course, those promises that were made that came true 2,000 years ago were promises made to David a thousand years before that and God had made promises to Abraham about David a thousand years before Abraham and then you read in the New Testament that before the foundations of the world, before anything was made, God didn't just have His promises about Jesus in mind, but He had you in mind when He made those promises about Jesus.

That's an incredibly powerful truth or reality to remember as we go into 2024. We know that God is active and so we can trust Him for what lies ahead.

But what are the changes that God is going to make through His promises? What are His promises going to do? And so our next point is looking at the fact that God's promises abound, overabound with grace and favor.

The Christmas story is all about bringing God's saving grace and uplifting favor into our lives. So have a look in Luke 1, have a look at verse 28 as He greets Mary, the angel Gabriel says, greeting O favored one, the Lord is with you.

She's favored and God is with her. Again in verse 30 He says, don't be afraid, you have found favor with God.

[8 : 49] And verse 31, His name, this child that is going to be born is going to be called Jesus. Jesus. Now, she would have known immediately what that meant.

Jesus is the English version of the Hebrew word, which is Yeshua, or we've got it as Joshua. Yeshua, Jesus, Yeshua, which means Yahweh saves.

God saves. He's going to do something for His people and it's going to involve this person, Jesus. Jesus. And so what happens as God makes His promises come true, we see that salvation and grace and favor are all wrapped up into one package.

And it means to have this favor, it's the word, the Greek word behind the word favor is the word grace. So grace and favor, it's got very similar meanings.

Here it means to find someone acceptable or to exalt them to a position that is highly favored, to lift them up. And the picture of this idea of grace or favor is of someone leaning towards someone to share benefits with them.

[10 : 06] It talks about, it refers to God freely extending Himself to His people because He is disposed to be near them to bless them. That's why it says grace, greetings of favored one, the Lord is with you.

You know, like at Christmas time when you hand presents to the kids, you don't just leave them and tell them, well, you probably do this, you know, it's under the Christmas tree, go fetch it. But normally, if there's someone that you like and if it's a friend or family, that's how you give a gift.

You don't just go, it's over there somewhere. There's a personal element, there's a leaning towards and that's what God is doing to Mary but through Jesus to the rest of the world.

What God does for Mary, the New Testament says Jesus does for us. In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul says, in love, God predestined us, Christians, for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the one he loves.

That word, freely given, the English word, freely given us in the one he loves is the same word that we find in Luke chapter 1 who is favored. It's a freely favored given towards someone.

[11 : 27] Now Christians have a funny way of not really believing that God is, that God actually loves us, that he actually favors us.

I mean, especially when we go through difficult times. But we need to take God at his word. Our problem is we think having God with us, having his favor with us means we're going to have an easy and comfortable life.

And like, you know, let's be honest, wouldn't it be great if 2024 was easy and plain sailing and none of the bad stuff that happened in 2023? I mean, that's what we all wish when we say, oh, you know, hope it's a great year going forward.

Let's not deal with the same stuff we had to deal with in 2024. No issues. But God doesn't mean that when he favors someone or when he's with them. When God says he's with someone, it means they receive his power and his protection to be able to do things otherwise that would be impossible for them to do.

And it's always to make his promises and his plans come true and not my wishes for an easy and comfortable life. Just take Mary as an example.

[12 : 42] Was Mary highly favored? Yes. Was there anything special about her? No. Was God with her? Yes. Did that stop her from going through difficult times?

No. She went through very difficult times. The death of her own son. So then, going into 2024, we need to trust that God does favor us.

That's what his word says. But that he actually loves us. That he's actually bent forward to give us his favor and to be with us.

That he is with us and that he will give us what we need to stay faithful to him. But all of this will only be true for you if you trust in Jesus as the Messiah. And that's because God's promise center on Jesus being his appointed, his special appointed king.

And so the next point is that God's promises center on Jesus being the unique Messiah. God's promises co-elice and center on Jesus.

[13 : 48] They're all about him and only he can make them come true in our lives. So God's promises are not just general soppy, sentimental, wishful thinking, Christmas, hall card movie type of vague ideas of peace, joy and love.

As nice as those are. God's promises are very specific about who Jesus is and what he's come to do. So again, verse 31 and 32 and 33.

Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall call him Jesus, meaning God is going to save his people. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord will give to him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.

And friends, these verses form the center of the whole Christmas story. Not just the Christmas story but the center of the story of God for his purposes for this world.

And Jesus needs to form the center of our story in 2024 if we're going to have God's promises come true in our lives. The story of our lives need to center and co-enlease.

[15 : 13] They need to have Jesus at the center. Now, you might have made it through Christmas and still not get that Jesus is at the center of it all.

And if that's the case then you've missed out on the best part of Christmas. John in his gospel writes these famous verses John 3.16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And that's the strongest promise that just about the strongest promise that God can make for us. It's full of his favor and his love and his grace. And that's the best reason I know to come to Christ.

to receive these sure and certain promises of eternal life. And so the Christmas story tells us that death will not have the final say but as we've seen in our previous series there are powerful forces at work to undermine God's promises and so what God what is also needed for God's promises to come to reality to come true is for God's power to be at work in his promises and they are.

And so the next point God's promises need God's power to make them work. God's promises need God's power to make them work. God's promises will not happen outside of God's working his power and strength to shape reality so that his will is accomplished in the world and in our lives.

[16 : 48] And so that's why you've got angels and the Holy Spirit and power that comes to bear in the Christmas story. So in verse 26 you've got God sending his angel Gabriel the archangel one of the most powerful beings he can in the heavenly realms.

Verse 35 the Holy Spirit is going to come upon Mary and the power of the Most High will overshadow her. And then ultimately in verse 37 God is going to accomplish these things because nothing is impossible for God.

nothing is impossible for God. And so we see that God's plans God's promises work precisely because they're his plans and his promises.

The Christmas story is unique because it's the greatest conglomeration of divine power in human history. The biggest saving event up till now in the story of the Bible is the Exodus event the ones we've been looking at over the last year.

Moses was powerful but he was only human. David was the most powerful king in the Old Testament destroying all of God's enemies but he also was only human.

[18 : 08] And so the Christmas story is unique because God sends into the world someone who is literally human and divine and we see that because of the power of the Holy Spirit working directly to create this person to make him a king.

And so friends God's power is needed to make his promises come true. And God's power is needed in our lives if we're to be effective Christians for him this year.

We simply cannot do life successfully on our own in our own power. So I'm not sure what your goals are this year. They could be small inverted commas maybe you want to lose weight maybe they're bigger issues you want to deal with goals you want to set yourself become get rid of anxiety trust God more or maybe really big we need to save South Africa from corruption for example.

Any of these things are only possible with God's power. God's power is needed to change because new life doesn't happen without God intervening and making something alive.

This world is too broken and dead and dying without him. So friends what I want us to know is that we need to realize if we trust Christ then we do have this power at work in our lives.

[19 : 37] It's something to hold on to and to remember. Luke writing later of the church records Jesus as saying in Acts chapter 1 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and then you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Just a couple of disciples a handful of people really we know who they were a fisherman lots of fishermen people who denied Christ people who had made mistakes people who didn't know or understand how things were people who came from nowhere and they received the Holy Spirit and they changed the world.

But there's still one last missing ingredient that's needed if we're to experience the promise of God's favor and grace and presence and power in our lives this year and that is we need to be humble and trust him for both the process and the outcome.

To experience God's promises we need to be humble and trust him for both the process and the outcome. God's plans are intended not for the high and mighty but for ordinary people who humbly accept that God is God and we are not and all we need to do is trust him.

in that regard we're like Mary in the Christmas story. So have a look at verse 26. Where do these promises come down to?

[21 : 18] Well, to an unknown couple young, they didn't know how life works, but to a town of Galilee called Nazareth.

A very ordinary little doorbell, nothing special about it. little bit like Plumstead. And when God made those promises to Mary when the angel is standing there, Mary doesn't initially respond with, oh, praise be to God, let's go for it.

She's troubled, she's confused, she doesn't know what's going on. Verse 29, she was greatly troubled and tried to discern, she tried to work out what type of greeting this might be, what's going on here.

she's stirred up with confusion and emotion, she's agitated and unsure of everything, very much like us as we go through life.

Later on she asks, verse 34, how is this going to happen? You're going to give birth to the Messiah, how? I'm still a virgin. She's totally unsure of how things are going to happen.

[22 : 32] And so like Mary, we too struggle with God's promises and plans, we too are troubled, full of doubt, what's going on, trying to understand how God is, what he's doing in our lives.

How can this be? How can God possibly bring something good out of this desperately dark situation and difficult thing I've been going through? How is he going to solve a seemingly unsolvable situation?

we don't know how he's going to do it. But we'll only experience his blessings and favor and his promises will only really come true, come to life in our lives, when like Mary, we submit ourselves to his words and his plans and his promises.

Look at how she ends up trusting in God despite her fears and doubts. it's in verse 38 when she realizes that nothing is impossible for God. That's the one truth that's going to help her and us.

Nothing is impossible with God because he's God. And in verse 38 Mary says, behold, I'm the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.

[23 : 55] So friends, as we look into 2024, being God's servants means humbling ourselves to his plans and trusting him for the process and the outcome of his promises.

Let him do it in his timing. Let him take care of the details. I don't know about you, but this should be a huge stress release on us.

Because we don't have the answers to life's myriads of questions and all the difficulties that come at us. But we can trust that God will be faithful to us if we trust him.

As we look into the year ahead and wonder what lies in store for us, hoping that this year will be good, meaning at the back of our minds it will be easy and not full of the hard things that we went through, just these few things to remember about the Christmas story that God tells us about, that his promises always come true, even though they take time.

His promises abound with his grace and favor towards us. The promises center on the Messiah. Without him in our life we've got no hope of anything good waiting for us in 2024.

[25 : 11] But if we do have him, we can expect all of God's blessings to come true in our lives. things like to experience this in our ordinary everyday lives we need to be humble and trust in his timing and trust in his wisdom.

And so hopefully that is how the Christmas story is going to help us look forward into 2024. Let's pray and ask God to help us with that. Lord, we've taken one last look in a sense at the Christmas story, although it's a story that continues in our lives and Lord, we are so thankful that your promises have come true, that your promises always come true.

Even when it doesn't look like anything's happening, Lord, we know that we can trust you. You've been doing this work of salvation all of these centuries. You've been working in our lives last year. And Lord, so we humble ourselves.

We put ourselves under your care. We put ourselves under your word. We put ourselves under your promises. And trust, Lord, that your grace and your favor will continue to be poured out in our lives, no matter what comes our way, knowing that they will come true both now and for all eternity.

In Jesus' name. Amen. . . .

[26:47]