

"REACH TOWARD HEAVEN"
By Rom A. Pegram (12/24/17 - Christmas Eve)

INTRODUCTION: MAN OVER THE FALLS. Years ago, a man fell over Niagara Falls. He ended up clinging for his life on water-washed rocks below the falls, separated from those who were safe above. Bystanders threw him a rope ladder, but it became tangled in a bush below. Someone asked for a volunteer to untangle the ladder and attempt to rescue the man. The volunteer climbed down, untangled the ladder from the bush, and then proceeded downward, swinging and swaying above the raging waters toward the helpless man.

Finally reaching the drenched and weakened victim, he held the ladder taut and urged the man to start climbing. Onlookers worried that the fatigued man lacked strength for the climb, but finally he reached the top and was pulled to safety. The courageous rescuer followed without incident...

TRANSITION: This story describes very well just what God has done for us through the birth of his Son, Jesus. Like the volunteer, he came down to rescue us from the mess that we were in—*separation from God*. But Jesus didn't just hold the ladder, however, for he knew we had no energy left to save ourselves; rather, he gave us *his* strength, connecting us once again with God, his Father...

So, what does God deserve after giving us this most incredible Gift—the *rescue* that we celebrate on this night? God deserves for us to *come up* to him in PRAISE, like Mary, who worshiped the Lord for keeping his promise to her and to all his people. Folks, the message of tonight's scripture is just this: ***Mary gave back to the Giver the gift of praise ... and we need to be doing the same!*** Let's look at Mary's story (Luke 1:26-56, NLT)...

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. ²⁸ Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" ²⁹ Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.

³⁰ "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never

end!”

³⁴ Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” ³⁵ The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she’s now in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God.” ³⁸ Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her.

³⁹ A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town ⁴⁰ where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. ⁴³ Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? ⁴⁴ When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵ You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.” ⁴⁶ Mary responded, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. ⁴⁷ How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! ⁴⁸ For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. ⁴⁹ For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me. ⁵⁰ He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. ⁵¹ His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. ⁵² He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. ⁵⁵ For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever.”

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then went back to her own home.

Folks, **THERE WAS PRAISE IN BETHLEHEM THAT FIRST CHRISTMAS NIGHT!** In the little town of Bethlehem, we see a somewhat odd collection of people celebrating the birth of Jesus, don’t we?

- *The magi (who came later)* ... with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
- *The shepherds* ... right out of the fields and their encounter with the messenger angel and his choir.
- A God-fearing man named *Joseph was there* ... with his Messiah-carrying wife.

These were people who celebrated Jesus from the beginning—the magi, the shepherds, and the parents! The worship—even that first night—must have been incredible—so much so that just words cannot capture it. *Worship needs to be experienced first-hand in order to be fully appreciated*—what we’re doing right now...

Folks, of all those who made up that first congregation in Bethlehem, I’d like us, tonight, to consider the *one*—in particular—whose joyful example invites us to *come and adore him*, Christ the Lord. Luke 2:19 tells us that ... after the shepherds had returned to their flocks, “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

What was Mary ‘treasuring up’ that night? The shepherds coming and telling her what the angels had said? Perhaps... I’m more inclined, though, to think the treasure chest Mary opened up that night was her heart, recalling what Gabriel told her nine months before in Nazareth! The unexpected & unbelievable news that *she had been selected to carry the Christ-child*. Or, now, the fulfillment of that promise taking place. Or maybe she just ‘treasured up’ the One who would grow in her womb—who’d be no ordinary baby ... and no ordinary man either. “But, how can all of this be?” Mary must have thought, “I am sexually innocent ... and yet I’m having a baby, just as the angel had said!” Then, she remembered the angels words to her when he said “... for nothing is impossible with God.”

As Mary pondered all these things, she recalled God’s *ability* to make good on the promises he’d made... *Everything had come to be just as he had promised!* Now, nine months later, Mary has the satisfaction of knowing that her willingness to be available, usable, and obedient had all been worth it...

There was praise in Bethlehem that first Christmas night ... and rightfully so. *God had blessed the world by rescuing it ... with the gift of his Son*. And, God was blessed that night, too, because *Mary gave back to the Giver the gift of praise...*

There was a man who came up to a preacher at the end of a Sunday service, one time, shook his hand and asked curiously about the meaning of the closing hymn, “We Bless Thee, O Lord.” He said, “You know, I can understand ‘God bless me’ ... but, how can I bless God?” The preacher replied in this way. “Do you have any children?” “Yes,” the man said. “At Christmastime do they ever give you a present?” “Sure,” was the man’s response. “Where do they get the money from?” the preacher asked. “Well, I give it to them,” the man chuckled. “And then they bless me in the giving!” Exactly.

Folks, when we take the time to ‘treasure up’ what God has done for us, and then take time to worship him, *we are praising God with the blessings that he puts in our lives*. And, that’s just what Mary was doing. There was praise in Bethlehem that first Christmas night! And...

THERE SHOULD BE PRAISE IN OUR COMMUNITIES ON *THIS* CHRISTMAS NIGHT AS WELL! Where do we begin? Well, like Mary, begin by ‘treasuring up’ all God’s done for you, then ‘ponder in *your* heart’ what the angel announced to Mary ... “For nothing is impossible with God.”

No, it’s *not* possible to earn God’s favor by ‘trying hard’ to please him; *you can’t earn your rescue!* But what *is* possible with God is a provision for you to be right with him—a *life of faith* that’s a gift, that comes by simply believing in his Son, Jesus—allowing the life of this baby born 2000+ years ago *to live in you...*

Perhaps you feel, tonight, like you’ve blown it ... so often that there’s no way God would ever accept you. After all ... *there’s no way that you would offer that kind of*

forgiveness to someone who'd treated you the way you've treated God over the years...

Well, let me remind you of something, folks. What's *impossible* with us ... is *always possible* with God! "For nothing is impossible with God." That's what Mary heard ... and that's what we need to hear tonight, too! That's what God's *grace* is all about ... and *out of that realization comes praise*—giving back to the Giver! Folks, I don't know what Christmas means to each and every one of you here tonight ... but God does...

- For some of you, it's *pretty sweet* right now; you can't imagine how it could get much better ...
- But, I know that for others of you in this room, *bittersweet* may be a better adjective to describe Christmas this year ... or maybe it's just plain *sour* right now...

How in the world can *you* give God praise ... in the midst of all you're going through? Just remember, "... nothing is impossible with God." That includes touching your life with the grace to handle whatever seems 'impossible' to you right now...

On Christmas Eve, 1973, in the midst of growing turmoil over the Watergate scandal, a troubled economy, and uncertainty over the future of U.S./Soviet relations, the co-host of CBS News' "60 Minutes," delivered the following commentary:

"Christmas is such a unique idea that most non-Christians except it, and I think sometimes envy it. If Christmas is the anniversary of the appearance of the Lord of the Universe in the form of a helpless baby, it's quite a day. It's a startling idea, and the theologians, who sometimes love logic more than they love God, find it uncomfortable. But if God did do it, he had a tremendous insight...

"People are afraid of God and standing in his very bright light. But everyone has seen babies and almost everyone likes them. So if God wanted to be loved as well as feared, he moved correctly here. And if he wanted to know people, as well as rule them, he moved correctly, because a baby growing up learns all there is to know about people.

"If God wanted to be intimately a part of [humanity], he moved correctly. For, the experience of birth and familyhood is our most intimate and precious experience.

"So it [goes] beyond logic. It's what a bishop I used to know called a kind of divine insanity. It's either all falsehood or it's the truest thing in the world. It's the story of the great innocence of God the baby. God in the power of man. And it is such a dramatic shot toward the heart, that if it is not true, for Christians, nothing is true. [That's how important this night is...]

"So even if you did not get your shopping all done, and you were swamped with the commercialism and frenzy ... be at peace. And even if you're the servants in this church

who've had to arrange extra seating for all who come specifically on *this* night, be at peace. The story stands...

"It's all right that so many Christians are touched only once a year by this incomparable story. Because some final quiet Christmas morning, *the touch will take.*" (Cal Thomas, 12-23-91)

And that's *my* prayer for each and every one of you for this Christmas. Learn from Mary. Ponder all that God has done in *your* life ... and then *give him the praise that's due.* Give him your *life* that's due. There's no praise greater than that!