

A Better Than Anything Christmas
Advent week 1:

What is the best or most memorable Christmas gift you have been given? Here are some of the biggest selling gifts of all time. Let's see if they stand the test of time. I picked a few out of the top 20 list.

#8. 1998: Furby, the electronic, animal-like robot that can blink and even learn English words. After launching the toy during the holiday season, Tiger Electronics sold 1.8 million Furbies in that year alone.

#9. 1997: Tamagotchis, the must-have handheld digital pets released by Bandai in 1996. They became one of the biggest toy fads of the 1990s and early 2000s, with over 76 million being sold worldwide as of 2010.

#10. 1996: Tickle Me Elmo, the wildly popular (if not somewhat creepy) plush toy from Tyco Toys that shakes and busts a gut when squeezed. The doll was in such high demand that there are documented cases of people getting arrested for fighting over it.

#12. 1991: POGs, or cardboard bottle caps from the Passion fruit-Orange-Guava brand. These were used to play a popular game among children, in which they were put into stacks and slammed with metal bottle caps.

#14. 1983: Cabbage Patch Kids, the soft-bodied dolls created by Xavier Roberts and originally called "Little People". They became so popular that they inspired the "Cabbage Patch Riots," a series of violent customer outbursts at several U.S. retail stores that year.

#16. 1975: the Pet Rock. These came packaged in cardboard boxes with straw and breathing holes as if they were live pets. The appeal was that, well, you didn't really need to do anything for them, making them the "perfect" pets.

So I guess some things don't really stand the test of time, even when people are willing to fight over them or over pay. I'm sure there were people who opened up those gifts and thought, "nothing could top this!"

In this series, we are going to talk about what is better and what will stand the test of time, the gifts that come with Jesus coming to earth as a baby. This is what I want for you this year; "A Better Than Anything Christmas."

We have this book that goes along with the teaching series written by Barb Reaach. It is a family devotional of sorts. It is an opportunity to make something lasting out of this Christmas season. Something that lasts longer than what we thought a certain gift, or a family gathering, or a party, or just a diversion from what is going on in the world.

Let's get right into the story and find these gifts that Jesus brings to us. ²⁶ 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!" Luke 1:26-33

The first gifts in this better than anything Christmas, the promises of God that come true in Jesus. But first...What promises did God make to Mary?

For us to understand these promises, we need to get a better idea of what it means to be "favored"? We think of something like playing favorites, which is negative. Many have misused this term, particularly in the prosperity gospel churches and television ministries. These groups explain, "favored" as a promise that you will be healthy, wealthy, and wise. God will help you win over those he hasn't favored. Diseases like COVID 19 won't affect you.

Favored does not mean that bad things won't happen to you as you live in a broken world. Look at Mary. She is about to be a pregnant

unmarried girl. She will be looked on as immoral. She will be excluded from the company of many people. She will be the object of gossip. After all, **who's going to believe her story.** Would you? If Joseph doesn't believe her, he can **divorce her and then things will get worse,** she will have no one to take care of her. **By law,** he could have her stoned for adultery.

Her road ahead is going to be tough, because she is chosen to carry and give birth to the Son of God.

This brings us to the first promise that God makes to Mary and it's what favor really means. **1. She is the object of God's grace.** 57

Favored...for you have found favor.

"receiving God's grace on the basis of his sovereign action" pg.57

Remember, she has no pedigree within that culture that would merit being the object of God's grace and attention.

Because she is the object of God's grace, she is a living expression of what it is like when someone receives God's grace.

Here's how one commentator describes this. **"She is honored by God not because of her own merit or because she has done anything but simple because she is the chosen vessel for this demonstration of God's grace."**
NIV Application Commentary Pg. 58

Mary is the point in which God's grace becomes visible to us. What does God's grace look like? It looks like someone with seemingly nothing to offer being used to do great things.

God brings his love and attention to places that don't deserve it.

So Mary, you are going to be the **object of my Grace.** That is **promise number one.** Promise number two goes hand in hand with this grace. **2. The Lord is with her.**

The God who created the universe comes to where Mary is, not the other way around. Mary didn't find her way to God. God condescended, or went to a place that was below his standing, and then remained there.

This isn't a momentary dose of God's grace and then he moves on. This isn't like UPS dropping off a package and then you're on your own. No, he is with her. His presence, which they would have seen at the temple in Jerusalem, was now a poor, insignificant, teenaged girl.

Have you ever had someone say to you, "We are in this together, I'm not going anywhere?" This usually comes when things are potentially going to be hard. When there is going to be resistance in life, we need to know that someone is in it with us, and they aren't going to bail when things get tough. That is the promise God was giving Mary. Not that this was going to be easy. I didn't hear that anywhere in the angel's announcement, but rather that "I will be with you no matter what." And "I will be with you," means that even though it will be tough in the end, I will demonstrate my goodness toward you, the object of my grace, and to all people. This is the beginning of the restoration of my rule on earth, my kingdom.

The last promise is the explanation of the purpose for the grace and the presence. 3. You will conceive and give birth to the Son of God.

The description of the son makes it totally clear to Mary that this is the promised Messiah, Christ, The King, the one who would save people from their sin.

I believe that Mary would recognize in the angel's voice the echo of these words that God commanded his prophet Isaiah to write _____ years earlier. ¹⁴ All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us'). Isaiah 7:14

She also would have never believed that God would use her to bring it about.

So, what is her response to this supernatural visit from an angel? Now that she has received these three promises of God's grace, his presence, and the birth of his messiah, how will she respond?

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 has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. ³⁷ For the word of God will never fail. Luke 1:34-37

This is not a question of doubt necessarily, but it is a reasonable one. Yes, there is some **basic biology** that makes this promise sound pretty far fetched.

Then the angel explains how God has bypassed the normal biological way babies are made. It's the Holy Spirit, the presence of God who has gone into her body and **created life, which is what God does.** And because the Holy Spirit did it, **the baby will be holy.** We think that means a **heavenly angelic glow** or something weird like that. Rather, it means **set apart** as different and for God's purpose.

The angel then gives her a little evidence that God can make a baby happen if he wants to by telling her about **Elizabeth** who could not become pregnant being now pregnant.

Here's the punchline...Jesus' birth makes all of those promises happen. The gift of God's promises to her and to us come through the birth of Jesus!

But Mary is human, so if she were to have doubts, which I believe she would have...**What might make her doubt these promises?**

Well, we have hit on much of this in our description of Mary, but let's make sure we are clear. The first one she articulated herself. **"It's not humanly possible."** That's the "how can it be" I'm a virgin part.

The **second one** comes from what we know about the culture at that time.
"I'm not worthy, I'm insignificant."

I don't have any **religious pedigree**. I'm not connected to the **lineage of David** from which the Messiah was to come. The guy who I'm supposed to marry, who has had absolutely nothing to do with this baby growing in me, is from the house of David. I'm from **backwater town, not from Jerusalem**, which is the center of everything. **And because I'm insignificant, that makes me unworthy of such an honor.**

This third one is similar to the second it's... "I'm too _____." This is the fill in the blank excuse. Mary could have filled it in with words like, **young, uneducated, poor, hayseed...**

When you look at these doubts, what is significant is that they are not specific to God's actions in Mary's life, they are universal.

When have you said to God that something just wasn't possible? Based upon the criteria that you have set in your own mind, it can't be done. That's because you are looking at it from a human perspective. **You are looking at it based upon the resources you can see and count.**

When have you said to God after prayer, a challenge in a sermon or reading his word, "but I'm not worthy of that divine consideration like _____." Or you looked at yourself from a purely human perspective and therefore **insignificant** when it comes to God's work in this world. Maybe the person is **someone from scripture** or **someone who you view** as a particularly good example of Jesus.

Or when have you said, when challenged by the Holy Spirit, "But I'm too _____." Again, we are back to **seeing resources and adding them up and it comes short.**

Let's make a list of the people in God's Word that were too _____ for God to use and do great things through.

- **Abraham** was too nomadic.

- **The nation of Israel** was too powerless, bigoted, isolationist, sinful, unfaithful and prone to wander.
- **Moses** was too hot headed.
- **David** was first too young and then too sinful.
- **Jacob** was too pampered and deceitful.
- **Joseph** was too young and prideful.
- **Jeremiah** was too depressed.
- **Peter** was too bigoted
- **The rest of the apostles** were too Galilean, which is code for backwater, hick, redneck or hayseed.
- **Paul** was too committed to the other team.
- **Timothy** was too young and inexperienced.
- **The early church** as too fragmented, under-educated, off in the margins of culture, self-absorbed.

Here's how I have felt about myself. This is the inner dialogue I have had my whole life. **You're not smart enough**, you don't have the resources, you're not tough enough, you are **too fearful**, **too depressed**, **too introverted**, you **don't know what you're doing** and people will soon discover this. **At one point, you were too young, too inexperienced.** Now you are **too old, too tired, too broken and still too depressed.**

What is Mary's list? She's too young, too female, too off the grid, too insignificant (her fiancé has the pedigree), too uneducated, too poor...

And yet, what was Mary's response. ³⁸ **Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her. Luke 1:38**

She didn't demand to get assurances that this would all happen. **She, by faith, trusted that it would and even though it didn't look easy or even safe for her, she still trusted.**

She didn't let those **three areas of doubt stop her.**

I'm not sure what Mary's inner dialogue was but I would guess if those doubts persisted, she would have to label them as not just wrong, but as lies from the enemy.

Satan, in scripture, is referred to as the father of lies...a liar from the beginning. In other words, he invented and perfected deception. It is his desire to "steal, kill, and destroy," all who God loves. He has no authority to do this, therefore, he must deceive people into doing it to themselves and others.

Because these doubts are universally human, I believe Satan would have been telling her that they are true. He wants her to believe that she is not the object of God's grace, that God views her as insignificant and, therefore, unworthy of his time, and that she is too young, female, poor, hick to be even noticed by God.

God wants you to trust that he will keep these same promises in your life.

1. You are the object of his grace.
2. He is with you.
3. **No, you aren't going to become pregnant with the Messiah.** He wants his life to be lived through you.

But the enemy wants you to believe that those promises aren't for you. They are only for special people, you know, like Mary.

That brings us to our...**Steps of obedience** What are we going to do in order to live in these promises rather than listening to the lies of the enemy?

Identify the lies the enemy says to you that keeps you from saying "yes" to God's voice.

Here are some of mine...

Confront these lies with God's truth about you.

If you listen to a lie long enough, you will begin to treat it like the truth. Once you treat it like the truth, your life will naturally align itself to those lies. In other words, you'll start acting like God's grace isn't for

you, you are insignificant and, therefore, unworthy and then there's your list of "I'm too..." statements.

I'm going to read these powerful statements of truth about anyone who is trusting in Jesus, anyone who has repented, believed and is following Jesus.

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become **a new person**. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! 2 Corinthians 5:17

For we are **God's masterpiece**. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. Ephesians 2:10

God decided in advance to **adopt us into his own family** by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.
Ephesians 1:5

For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. ¹⁰ So you also are **complete through your union with Christ**, who is the head over every ruler and authority. Colossians 2:9-10

We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are **no longer slaves to sin**. Romans 6:6

But you are not like that, for you are a **chosen people**. You are **royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession**. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9

"I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I **set you apart and appointed you** as my prophet to the nations."
Jeremiah 1:5

What is God asking you to say, "yes" to?

We have put all of this on a card for you.

On the front we have the first two questions with some space to write.
What lies does the enemy say to me that could keep me from saying "yes" to God's voice?

What is God asking you to say "yes" to?

On the back, we have this question and some of how God's word answers it.
What is the truth about me?

A new person...2 Corinthians 5:17

God's masterpiece...Ephesians 2:10

Adopt us into his own family...Ephesians 1:5

Complete through your union with Christ...Colossians 2:9-10

No longer slaves to sin...Romans 6:6

Chosen...royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession...1 Peter 2:9

Set you apart and appointed you...Jeremiah 1:5

Add your own.

Don't be disappointed or let down this year. Don't view Christmas as a **hype machine** or **diversion**.