

Christmas Favored

December 17, 2017

You have been pre-approved! How many of you have gotten one of those notices in the mail? They concern a credit card, an equity loan, or a new mortgage. They want you to sign on with them. They imply that they have already checked you out and approved you to borrow their money. All YOU have to do is say, "Yes!"

Pre-approval is great. It is even more valuable when it concerns a relationship with God. So let me clear up any questions you have about that. When it comes to the ability of having a right relationship with God everyone in this room has been pre-approved. Righteousness with God is available to everyone of you. All you have to do is say, "Yes!" to God's offer.

God is offering to save each of us from the penalty of our sins. God makes it available as a gift of His grace. The word **Grace = good will; favor; So Grace and favor are synonyms.**

Let me illustrate grace for you. When my kids were young and playing out in the yard, I would occasionally give them a popsicle. Of all the kids in the neighborhood I only gave my sons a popsicle, unless other kids were playing with by boys. Then they would get a popsicle too. I gave my sons all kinds of attention and gifts that I did not show the other kids in the neighborhood. I favored my sons.

God favors us. God graces us with good things. Christmas is all about grace. We see many people who are Christmas favored in the Christmas stories.

The first to be favored are the Magi. Who or what they were, we do not know for sure. What we DO know is that they had information about a king to be born. They knew this king, this anointed one, this messiah, would be announced to them by a special star. They were favored by God to have this information, favored by God to see the star, favored by God to make the long trip from the East to come and pay their respects to the new king.

Matthew 2:1-2 (NIV) After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

So the Magi were favored by God. The religious leaders of Israel were not so favored as that. They were not told of a special star. Even if they saw it, they did not know its meaning. The regular people in the land of Israel did not know of the star and its meaning. The only hint in the Bible about who knew of the star and its meaning was the Magi. We don't see that Joseph or Mary knew ahead of time about the star. There are many prophecies in the Bible about the coming messiah, but none of them mention a star. Only the Magi knew about the star. God favored them with that information. The Magi were Christmas favored. They took joy in the new king.

So too were Zecharia and his wife Elizabeth. They had faithfully served God their whole lives, yet they had no children of their own. In that day and that culture, this was considered a bad thing. While everyone liked Zecharia and Elizabeth, the community opinion was that God was displeased with them for some sin. We know this not to be true, but that is what

many believed. Zecharia and Elizabeth may have believed it too. Even so, they did not let it keep them from faithfully serving God.

Luke 1:6 (NIV) Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

An angel visited Zecharia and told him that they were going to have a baby, a boy, and he would be a special child, who would serve a special purpose for God. So in their old age, Zecharia and Elizabeth were shown grace by God. They were Christmas favored. And they were filled with joy.

Then we see a young woman who is favored.

Luke 1:26-28 (NIV) In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

When we speak of someone being favored. We sometimes mean it as a bad thing.

For example, judges and referees and umpires are supposed to be impartial. They are not supposed to favor one team over another. If they do, we say they are playing favorites.

Well guess what, God plays favorites. He favors mankind over the animal kingdom. He favors mankind over the angels and other spiritual beings in heaven. He also plays favorites among people. Among all the ancient people groups God chose Israel to be His favored people. He blessed them in ways that God did not bless other nations. Of all the tribes of Israel he favored the Levites. Of all the men in Israel who could have been chosen as king, God favored David.

Mary was highly favored by God. She was picked to give birth to the Messiah. Unlike Zecharia and Elizabeth, we know almost nothing of Mary before her encounter with the angel. We know she was a relative of Elizabeth. We assume Mary was a teenager because she was engaged to be married, but not yet married. Families arranged marriages for their daughters. This leads us to believe she was a teenager or just out of her teens. Nothing is said about her character or faith up to this point. All we are told is that she was highly favored by God. Mary accepted this gift of God's grace with faith and joy.

The next to be favored is Joseph. He too is part of this unusual marriage where their first child would be a foster son.

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV) This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call

him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

What a privilege Joseph had, to be a part of this wonderful event. He too accepted this gift of God's favor with faith and joy.

But wait, there is more. There were shepherds who were favored by God too. Of all the people in the land to be told of the arrival of God's anointed one, the last anyone would think to tell would be the shepherds. They were pretty low on the social scale.

But God did not see them that way at all. God favored them with the news of the birth of a savior.

Luke 2:8-12 (NIV) And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The lowly shepherds were favored by God to hear the birth announcement of the Messiah. They too accepted God's gift of grace with faith and joy.

There were also Simeon and Anna, two separate individuals who had been favored by God to hear that Israel's savior had been born. We will not read their stories this morning, but they too accepted God's gift of grace with faith and joy.

But not everyone was overjoyed at the news of a new king's birth. Herod recognized this news as referring to the Messiah and sought to put an end to the child.

Matthew 2:3-5 (NIV) When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied...

Matthew 2:16 (NIV) When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Herod did not receive the news with faith and joy. And he brought great sorrow upon the citizens of Israel, Bethlehem in particular.

Today people still receive the news of a Savior differently. Some hear it with faith and joy, and others fight against it, push that news away.

How about you? God has graced you, too, with the knowledge of your need for a savior. Jesus is the savior God has sent to us. But why?

God favors us because He is good.

I love the example of grace from a Dennis the Menace comic strip. Dennis is shown walking away from Mrs. Wilson's house with his friend Joey. Both boys have their hands full of cookies. Joey then asks, "I wonder what we did to deserve this?" Dennis gives a very insightful answer. He said, "Look Joey, Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice."

God is nice. God is good. God has compassion on us and kindly provided the savior we needed.

God favors us because He loves us.

We are His creation. He made us. He made us for His own purposes. And He has chosen to love us.

Sin has messed us up. But God does not love us any less. Even knowing how sinful we would be, God provided us a Savior.

Romans 5:8 (NIV) But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

God is good. God loves us. God favored us with a Savior. God favored us to hear the good news of salvation in Jesus. We are Christmas favored. Like the others, we should receive God's favor with faith and joy.

Invitation

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, today is a good day to start.

When you have a bill that is due, the creditor may offer you a grace period. This means the bill is overdue and he could charge you a penalty, but if you pay the bill within the grace period, there won't be any penalty. It is like he is doing you a favor. He is showing you favor, offering you grace. But it is a limited time offer. A grace period always has a time limit. You have right now to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. But you may not have another opportunity. Receive Him today.