

## DON'T GIVE UP – LOOK UP!

Merry Christmas, Fil-Am! We've all heard the phrase, "Things are looking up." What in the world does that mean, "Things are looking up"? It means the situation is improving. It means the circumstances are getting better. It means my problems are decreasing and my opportunities are increasing. This Christmas, I want to suggest to you a simple truth for your New Year. Things will start looking up when you start looking up. In other words, your circumstances will improve when you stop looking at them and start looking at God. Let me say it again. Things start looking up when I start looking up.

You know, in the Bible, there's a phrase that's used over and over and over, and it is the phrase, "Lift up your eyes." It's said many, many times in Scripture. Just one way of saying, "Look up. Get your eyes off yourself and off your problems and off your circumstances and onto God. Refocus. Look at him." Things will start looking up when I start looking up.

You know, God said, "Lift up your eyes" to some pretty famous people. He said it to Abraham, he said it to Jacob, he said it to Moses, said it to Isaiah. Jesus said it to his followers. Lift up your eyes. Look up.

There's an old rhyme that says, "Two men looked out from prison bars. One saw mud, the other saw stars." In other words, one inmate looked down in despair, but the other one looked up in hope.

On a clear, cloudless night, when you look up, what do you see? Thousands and thousands of stars. God created every one of them. And those stars are the exact same stars that were shining on the night of Jesus' birth 2,000 years ago. When King David looked up at night, he wrote these words in Psalm 8:

*"God, when I look up at night sky and I see your handiwork... the moon and all the stars that you set in place, I ask, 'What are we mortals, that you should bother with us? And why should you care about mere humans?' But you made us just a little lower than the angels and you've given us glory and honor, and you put us in charge of everything you made... Lord, you are amazing!"* (Psalm 8:3-6).

When we look up and we see how big God is, it naturally shrinks the size of our problems. They just don't seem to be as big or as overwhelming when compared to the greatness of God.

You know, about 700 years before Jesus Christ came to earth, Isaiah announced that God would send his Son to earth. This was 700 years before the very first Christmas. The prophet Isaiah predicted the coming of Jesus to earth, pointing out that the Messiah, the promised Savior, would be both great and gentle. That the Savior would be both powerful and personal. He'd be strong enough to save us and solve all of our problems, but also tender and loving. And Isaiah 40 is all about this. Let me just read a little bit from Isaiah 40 to you.

*"Shout this news from the mountaintops! Tell everyone, 'Your God is coming!' Yes, the Sovereign Lord is coming in all of his glorious power... But he will feed his flock like a tender shepherd, and carry his lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart."* Can you hear that tenderness? *"He will lead us gently."* (Isaiah 40:9-11).

But then Isaiah talks not just about God's gentleness, but about his greatness. His enormous power, verses 12-15, and he says this:

*"Who else has held the oceans in his hand? Who has measured off the heavens with his fingers? Who knows enough to be God's teacher or counselor? Has the Lord ever needed anyone's advice? Does he need instruction about what is good or what is best? No, for all the nations of the world are nothing in comparison to him. They are but a drop in the bucket, mere*

*dust on the scales. He picks up islands as though they had no weight at all... It is God who sits above the circle of the earth." (Isaiah 40:12-15, 22).*

Now finally, Isaiah gets personal, and he applies the coming of the Messiah, the Savior, to our lives today, verses 26-31. He says this:

*"So look up! Look up into the heavens. Who created all the stars? He made each one after another, calling each by its name... And he counts each one to see that none are missing." Do you know how many stars are in the universe? God has numbered and named them all.*

*"So how can you say that the Lord does not see your troubles? How can you say, 'God doesn't care about what happens to me'?... Don't you know that the Lord is the Lord, he never grows tired or weary, and that he knows and understands everything? He gives strength to those who are tired and worn out; he offers power to the weak. Even young people become exhausted, and want to give up, but those who put their hope in the Lord will find new strength. They will fly high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will keep on walking without fainting!" (Isaiah 40:26-31).*

Now, I don't know what problems you're facing or carrying this Christmas. I don't know what burdens you're bearing. I don't know what grief or fear or anxiety or confusion you may be feeling right now, but I do know this: you need to look up instead of giving up. Don't give up; look up. No matter what you're facing right now, you need to do the same thing that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds did when they felt overwhelmed at the very first Christmas.

You know, we have this idealized and romanticized picture in our minds of how everything was just sweet and non-stressful leading up to Jesus' birth. That's far from how those involved on the first Christmas actually felt. The very first Christmas didn't start out being a very merry Christmas. The truth is, everybody involved at the first Christmas was pretty stressed out by the news, and their first reactions were not positive, not one of them. But let me just review how those first people felt at the first Christmas.

First, how did Mary initially react to the news that she was gonna be the mother of the Son of God? The Bible tells us that when the angel first appeared to Mary and explained what was about to happen, all she could think of was a thousand questions, and I don't blame her. "What? Why me? How? When? Where? How could this possibly happen? What am I supposed to tell my fiancé? What am I supposed to tell my parents, my friends? Who's gonna believe me?" Actually, Mary's initial reaction was quite normal. If you're taking notes, you might write this down.

- **Mary was confused and worried.**

And believe me, if an angel showed up to you and told you that, you'd be confused and worried too. In Luke 1:29, it tells us this: "*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*"

By the way, the Greek word here, where it says "troubled," it's only used one time in the Bible. It is the word in Greek "diatarasso," and it means "perplexed, confused, greatly agitated." That's how she felt. She didn't feel merry in Merry Christmas. She felt confused and troubled.

How about Joseph? How did Joseph initially react to the news? Well, the Bible told us that when Mary explained that she was pregnant but she had not been unfaithful to Joseph, that she was still a virgin and that God was the Father of the baby, what do you think his initial reaction was? Well, it was a complete normal reaction too. You might write this down.

- **Joseph was hurt and brokenhearted.**

Well, of course he was. Would you believe that story if your fiancé told that to you? Joseph felt betrayed. He felt lied to. He felt like a fool. He felt cheated on. He felt embarrassed. He didn't know what to say at all to his friends. "My girlfriend, my fiancé, is pregnant, but we haven't had a relationship and by the way, she's claiming the Father is God." He's deeply hurt. He's deeply disappointed. He wants to be done with Mary, quietly and quickly. The Bible tells us this. Matthew 1:19 says, "*Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet[a] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly*". For Joseph, this whole thing is just too unbelievable to be true. I mean, what a preposterous lie his fiancé is telling him. No, Mary's confused and troubled, but Joseph is hurt and brokenhearted. He's not having a merry Christmas either.

What about the shepherds? How did the shepherds initially react to the news? The Bible tells us exactly how they felt at first. Luke 2:8-9 says this:

*"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... [get this] terrified."*

The Greek word for "Terrified" is "Phobeo". Sounds like Phobia, right? Because that's the root word. And when you have phobia of something, what do you want to do? You want to run away and that's how it's used here in this verse. In their fear, the shepherds wanted to run away. If you were taking notes, you can write this down.

- **The shepherds were scared to death.**

They're not happy. They're not having a merry Christmas. They are scared to death. These guys panicked. They're filled with fear. They're looking for someplace to hide. Their hearts are pounding. In other words, when the shepherds first heard the news, they freaked out. They're not happy either.

So let's just review our cast of characters at the first Christmas. Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. They're confused, worried, hurt, brokenhearted, fearful, and scared. The bottom line is this: at one point, every one of the characters in the Christmas story felt like giving up.

Have you ever felt like that? I'm sure you have. Two thousand years later in a crowd of this size, I am absolutely certain that many of you are feeling one of these emotions at Christmas number 2020.

Folks, we all know that this year has been one of the most difficult, challenging, and confusing years in recent history. And you know what I'm talking about. The Redskins just changed their name to a generic and unforgettable name like the Washington Football Team. So confusing. But, of course, I'm talking about the coronavirus crisis. And along with that the racial tension and political divide, and natural disasters like hurricanes and bushfires, and typhoons and earthquakes around the world. One of the few positive developments is that vaccines for the virus are now being made available. It's a welcome development but I understand that some are afraid of it. And yet, this is our best chance of getting out of this pandemic. I will get that vaccine and have it televised, too. I guess on Zoom.

But this Christmas, you may be feeling confused or worried or hurt or brokenhearted. You may be feeling fearful or just exhausted for personal reasons. What does this Christmas story have to say to you? Here's the key. Here's the key to less confusion and more clarity, less stress and more peace. The key to healing your hurt or your broken heart, to replacing your fears with

confidence, to replenishing your exhausted soul. What is the key? Do what these people did when they felt like giving up.

The very first Christmas, every one of these characters looked up to God. They all looked up to God. I want you to write this down, because here's the big idea.

**When their focus changed, their feelings changed!**

When their focus changed, their feelings changed. When I look up, things will start looking up.

- **Everything changed for Mary when she focused on God's promises.**

At first, Mary was confused and troubled by the angel's words to her. Probably while the angel was explaining to her what was going to happen to her, her mind was focused on herself. She's focused on her unplanned pregnancy. She's focused on the impossible position that she's been put in, the gossip and the rumors and her likely rejection by her fiancé, her own family. What her friends are going to say, and how she's going to be ostracized by the community. To her this seemed like bad news. Then Mary looked up and she turned her focus to God and specifically to the promises of God. And when she did that, she began to believe and she began to see that God had a bigger and a better idea for her life. She began to see that this was not the end of the story, but actually it was the beginning of a much greater story that God had chosen her to be a part of.

The Bible says it like this in Luke 1:37-38. The angel told Mary, "*For no word from God will ever fail.*" "*I am the Lord's servant,*" Mary answered. "*May your word to me be fulfilled.*" Then the angel left her.

See, she's changed her focus. "*I am the Lord's servant*". That's a sign of surrender, submission. Her focus is now on God.

When Mary's focus changed, it changed her feelings, and her feelings changed from confusion to celebration. And in Luke 1:46-55, she prays the most amazing prayer of praise and thanksgiving after what seemed to be bad news, and it's chock full of Scriptures that she obviously had memorized.

If you read that prayer of Mary, it's full of Scripture. Mary was a woman of the Word, and she focuses not on her situation, but on the promises of God. Mary says this in the beginning of her prayer, "*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.*" (Luke 1:47-49)

Is that a change in attitude? I would say so, because she's changed her focus.

What about Joseph? Everything changed for Joseph when he changed his focus, when he looked up, and he stopped focusing on his pain and started focusing on God's plan.

- **Everything changed for Joseph when he focused on God's plan.**

Joseph, of course, naturally, felt hurt. He felt brokenhearted, because he's focusing on his own feelings, being betrayed. He's focusing on the shame that it brought to Mary. He couldn't see any other solution except his plan to quietly break off the engagement.

Maybe you're in a situation and you can't see another way but to get out of it. But Joseph's plans changed dramatically when his focus changed. And in a dream, he looks up in this dream and he sees an angel, who reveals God's plan. Matthew 1:20 tells us, "*But after he had considered this, (he was now decided on leaving Mary) 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.'*" And then, a few verses afterwards,

we read, *“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.”* (v.24) Now he's focusing on God's plan, not his pain.

What about the shepherds?

- **Everything changed for the shepherds when they looked up.**

That same night, it says that the shepherds, they'd only been focused on protecting their sheep from predators, and that's why they're out with their sheep sleeping on the hillside. They're not in some motel. They had no other focus. They're focusing on protecting the sheep. But when the angel put on a light show in the sky and it was bright and brilliant, it scared them to death. But they calmed down when they heard what the angel had to say, in Luke 2:10-13.

The angel said this: *“Do not be afraid!”* By the way, the angel said that to Mary and to Joseph also. *“I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’”* (Luke 2:10-14).

You know, that concert of music in the sky totally changed their focus, and next it tells us in Luke 2:13-16, *“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So they hurried off”* They're not strolling along. They're running, *“and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.”*

Now, listen. They're not only no longer afraid, now they're courageous, and they boldly start telling everybody else they come in contact with. Luke 2:17 and in verse 20 says this: *“When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”*

Like Mary and Joseph, their focus changed from themselves to God. It was the change in focus that changed their whole attitude. What started out as panic turned into a party. Wouldn't you like that in your life? Only Jesus Christ can turn your fears into fun.

Let me ask you, how do you know when you've really met Jesus? Not knowing about him, but you actually know him. You have a relationship with him. How do you know when you've had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ? I'll tell you. You act and react the same way that the characters during the first Christmas did.

When you feel afraid, don't focus on the thing that makes you afraid, but focus on God who can handle whatever trouble you're in. When you're confused, don't go here and there, getting worried, consulting this and that, go directly to God and ask for his guidance.

I remember years ago. It was Christmastime and I was living and working in Australia. Actually, the week before I resigned from my job. God had impressed on me to leave my job and attend a Discipleship Training School in Hawaii. So, I applied at the school and was accepted, sold nearly all my stuff so I can buy my plane ticket, and then left my job. The problem was I didn't have the money for my tuition. I told myself that God will provide. I waited for days but the money didn't arrive. Like Mary, I became agitated. Greatly troubled. Then, one day, a few days before Christmas, feeling nervous because of my situation I did my devotions. The reading was Psalm 46. When I reached verse 10 it seemed like God spoke to me. It said, *“Be still and know that I am God”*. Suddenly, my nervousness went away. I became peaceful. I sensed God telling me that he would take care of my need.

I was sure now that money will soon arrive but as days passed it didn't. You see, my departure to Hawaii was on the first of January and it was already the 24<sup>th</sup>. Yes, I could fly but

where do I go if I didn't have the tuition? You know what, I told myself that I wouldn't get off the plane when it landed in Hawaii but ride with it to the mainland and get off LA where my parents were. Like a stow-away, you know. Anyway, like Joseph, I was hurt and felt like God abandoned me.

The next day, Christmas day, I went to see a churchmate who had invited me to his place. So, we chatted but all the while I was shaking inside and my mind was actually focused on my predicament. After a while, my friend took a box to show me what he got as a Christmas present from his parents. He pulled a rolled up calendar from inside the box and as he unrolled it, I saw on the first page of the calendar in big bold letters these words from the Bible, "Be still and know that I am God". Those words took my anxieties away and I felt God assuring me that he will take care of me. I went home feeling like the money will arrive in the next few days.

The 26<sup>th</sup> came, no money. The 27<sup>th</sup>, still no money. The 28<sup>th</sup>, still no money. 4 more days and I'll be leaving and I didn't know what God was doing. I'm beginning to lose hope. And like the shepherds, I became afraid and wanted to just run away. I even doubted whether God had really called me to do the training.

Now, on the 28<sup>th</sup>, around 11 am, a churchmate picked me up in order to visit an old lady in the church who had invited us for lunch. When we met, she was excited for me because of the missionary training I was going to do and she said she was happy for me and all that stuff. I was just nodding and tried to smile. I was actually nervous and agitated. I didn't know whether I could eat. As she was preparing food, I walked around the house and then when I entered the kitchen, I noticed a folded piece of paper on top of the refrigerator and there was something written on one side. I went closely, reached for it, and read what was written on it. It was a verse that said, "Be still and know that I am God". Again, God was giving me assurance and I felt assured. I was able to eat and I enjoyed my lunch. But it was short-lived because when the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> came, the money didn't come. The next day, church members were going to meet in the evening for our New Year's Eve Service. In the morning, I decided that I would talk to my pastor after the service so that I could ask him to support me. I was desperate. I would tell him that I would give back the money once I was done with the training and back in Australia. He was a good friend of mine and I was sure he could convince the church council who are good friends of mine, too. And so I went to the evening service and every body was there except the pastor. We waited for him. I was especially eager to see him. Then, an announcement was made. The pastor couldn't make it because he was sick. What a time to get sick!

I went home feeling totally despondent. I thought I wasted my job and my time in Australia. To think that my former boss was already going to sponsor me as an immigrant before I resigned from my job.

Then, at the stroke of midnight, a friend from the Philippines called. My friend, who was in the Philippines for a vacation, asked me about my trip the next day. I said that I might not be able to fly because I didn't have the tuition. And she said, "Why didn't you tell me earlier? Tomorrow, you fly and I'll wire the money to your school". My friend has a big heart for missions but I didn't know she had big savings, too. Just like that and I was on my way.

Through that experience, God taught me the valuable lesson of not focusing on myself, my problems, my situation, but on focusing on him always. I learned, too, that despite my fears and doubts, he will always be there to assure me that he loves me and always will take care of me. He will never abandon me.

And folks, that is true for you, too. If you are a child of God, he will see you through no matter what you're going through. Are you troubled? Are you confused? Are you afraid? Just trust in him who will never leave you nor forsake you. He is always faithful.

This Christmas, know that he sent his own Son Jesus to let you know that he really loves you. John 3:16 says, "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." If you don't have a personal relationship with Jesus, all you need to do is to ask forgiveness for your sins and ask Jesus to come into your heart to be your Lord and Savior. If you can't remember the time when you committed your life to Jesus to serve him, to make him your master, to allow him to control every part of your life, then perhaps you never did. Today you can make that decision. You see, because Jesus loves you, he died on the cross for you. The Bible says that we are all sinners and it is our sin that separates us from a holy God. We cannot save ourselves. Our good works, our religion, our philosophy, our spouse, they cannot save us. Only Jesus who the Bible says is the only mediator between God and man. He came to earth in order to die. For you. That you may receive eternal life. You see, he rose again from the dead and if you believe in what he has done for you on the cross, you too will rise from the dead and be with Jesus forever in heaven. God gave his Son Jesus on Christmas day for you. Will you give your life to God this Christmas?

Let us pray.