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Introduction

No Ordinary Christmas

*“Christmas day is on its way. The signs are everywhere. Up and down across the town the Christmas spirit is there. Joyful sounds and sights abound, the streets are filled with love. All in celebration of the child sent from above...”*¹

The lyrics of this Christmas melody have been with me for decades and pretty much sum up the Christmas season. Like many, the Christmas season holds lots of memories for me. No other month in the year brings with it its own unique sights, sounds and scents. You can see the blinking lights and nativity scenes on every corner; you can hear bells jingling and pianos playing chords of “Silent Night,” and you can smell the pine scent and gingerbread cookies baking. This time of year evokes all of your human senses, leaving none untouched to the point that you know that Christmas is coming long before December 25th arrives.

Looking back on when I was a young girl, I remember Christmases being really big around my home. Weeks before Christmas day, I recall countless trips to the stores for shopping and time spent wrapping all the gifts we had purchased for others. I recall decorating our live pine tree, preparing for relatives that were traveling in from out of town, writing out our Christmas cards, and planning the big meal. Oh, let’s not forget the many Christmas pageants I practiced for and performed in at school and church. And just a couple days before Christmas, we would cook and bake until the wee hours of the night.

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As I mentioned, Christmas at my house was really big! For a 7 to 13 year old girl, getting everything you asked for on your Christmas list and more was a dream come true. My mother took care of my every need and many wants — from toys to clothes to jewelry and a big ticket item like a computer. She even threw in a little cash! I truly received more than one girl could manage. As I grew older, eventually going off to college, I would come home for Christmas break and would enjoy much of this although the gifts I was used to receiving had begun to diminish.

Younger cousins had taken my place and were being presented with their own windfall of gifts. My days as the receiver of so many gifts had been traded for the role of a maturing young lady who had found her place in the Christmas preparations among the older women of our family. I was now responsible for the sweet potatoes, the sock-it-to-me cake, and the rolls. It was a place of honor and a role that I was proud to fill.

After I graduated from college and was living on my own — a job and apartment to prove it — I began spending fewer Christmases back in my hometown, and when an opportunity to go home presented itself, my trip was short but sweet. The length of a vacation for a working woman did not compare to that of a college student. To fill the Christmas void, I started attending office holiday parties with my co-workers. I exchanged gifts with them and various other friends. Many of the signs of “Christmases of old” were replaced by upscale hotel ball rooms with loud bands and extravagant buffet tables. I would also celebrate the season by attending the candlelight service at my church. And like I had when I was a child, I sang in the special musicals and enjoyed wonderful and relevant sermons from my pastor.

For Christmas of 1999, I thought I would give a more thoughtful gift to my family and friends instead of the costly gifts I would normally give and pay for long after Christmas was gone. I decided to give something that would express my passion for flavorful foods and my joy of cooking. I wanted to put lots of love in this gift by making it with my own hands. So rather than competing with the mall crowds, I retreated to my kitchen and prepared dozens of mini loaves of Orange-Cranberry bread as well as votive-sized, pomegranate scented candles that I had learned to make one summer. I carefully packed

each gift in its own box with tissue paper and I included a Christmas card which I had also created. On the card I placed the recipe for the bread and it stated: *“From the Kitchen of Stephanie...made with lots of cheer!”* I remember how very satisfying it felt to give such a gift.

That year served as a catalyst for how I would enter and exit the Christmas seasons for years to come. In a culture that so undeniably waters down Jesus’ birthday, I desired with all my heart to experience with a heightened awareness God’s true blessings and His warm presence. But I was often left feeling so unsatisfied and so empty during those last days of December. Each year’s Christmas had started to take on a very routine feeling to me. Some years would be more kind than others. The spiritual journey that I had earnestly set out on several years before had gained momentum, and the closer I grew towards God, the deeper the yearning grew in me. It had become a hole that was begging to be filled as I struggled with feelings of just going through the motions during this perfect and holy holiday.

A few years later, I met, dated and became engaged to my then fiancé, Derrick. We were excited and blessed to celebrate our first few Christmases as a couple. We had great times attending Christmas parties at our church and our jobs and looked forward to exchanging gifts with one another each year. Shortly after we were married, I found myself preparing for a Christmas of my own with my new husband. I called back home to my mom and grandmother to get all the good recipes, making sure I had the right ingredients. I wanted to make my husband’s Christmas special since he too would not be able to travel to his hometown. Besides, what new bride would not seize the opportunity to show her new husband that she could prepare a feast fit for a king? I remember how much fun it was to decorate our first tree together. We were in love and so full of anticipation.

Although the Christmas holiday as husband and wife was a warm and joyous time, I once again found myself wanting Christmas to mean so much more than putting up a tree, buying gifts and preparing a big meal. The season could still feel somewhat empty. I felt as though all of my physical needs were met, but a spiritual need in me yearned desperately to be met. While I had not lost my understanding of the true meaning of this most significant day, I was struggling to live it out.

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In December of 2006, my plans to once again make ready the holiday season included going to see a new movie that had been released titled *The Nativity Story*. From the previews, I could sense that there was an authenticity about this portrayal of the Biblical account of Mary, Joseph and their baby boy. I grew excited about seeing it. I became even more anxious to see the movie when, during a Christmas themed sermon one Sunday at church, my pastor recommended it. He had given the movie his stamp of approval, mentioning that it was a beautiful story that stuck closely to the Scriptures. In the same service, He challenged the congregation by asking, “What did we really want for Christmas?” He then emphatically stated that his assumption was that what we all really wanted for Christmas was our purpose—our reason for being, our fulfillment of what God put us on the planet for. He went on to say that we could not get that from a box or any store. He was right! This was not the kind of gift that could be purchased with any amount of money or wrapped with elaborate paper and bows.

So, on December 18th of 2006, a dear friend and I made our way to the theater. Like so many others, we had read the story of Joseph and Mary plenty of times, had seen for many years renditions of the Christmas story on stage, and had listened to numerous sermons preached about Jesus’ Birth. But nothing we had seen or heard made this biblical account seem so real to us as this movie. It wasn’t the typical Hollywood blockbuster with a star-studded cast and an exaggerated storyline packed with dramatic twists and turns. Nor did it have attention grabbing special effects. Instead, the cast in a very un-forceful and rather humbling manner painted a realistic picture of life in the Bible days. It made the very legend like characters of Mary and Joseph seem like relatable and ordinary people. They were average people, living in an average community of their times, and going about their day to day activities just like us. The film’s natural imagery made me feel as though I lived right there in Mary and Joseph’s community.

When they set out on the journey of their lives, it was especially moving to see, with a very quiet power, how God’s Holy Spirit provided for them, protected the promise in them, and prepared the way for them. Those short, simple yet significant chapters of Scripture really came to life for me. I was earnestly able to consider that Mary’s surreal experience was undeniably real.

From the time I left the theater and for weeks later, something from deep within was calling and stirring in me. I could not stop thinking about what I had witnessed in the interpretation of this, the greatest story ever told. That year (as I had hoped for many Christmases past) my senses as well as my spirit had been awakened in the season. I had finally seen this beloved story from the Bible through God's eyes. I could not have received a better gift, and I could not have been more satisfied. It had been a gift worth waiting for. It was the gift that my pastor had talked about in his sermon—the gift he surmised that we all truly want. I was like that 13 year old girl again who got everything she wanted for Christmas and more.

Through this movie, although a cinematic performance based on real life events, God had given me a glimpse of His glory. Through Mary's experience, I had seen His power demonstrated, His grace poured out, and His will accomplished right before my very eyes. I wasn't hearing about or reading about it. I was seeing it, and like her, I treasured up all these things and pondered them in my own heart (Luke 2:19). It became so obvious to me that God was wanting me (and waiting for me!) to reveal His glory through my life. Believing that I have a purpose was not enough for Him. Discerning my purpose was not enough for Him. He wanted more. He would be satisfied with nothing less than me fulfilling it.

I didn't know it at that time, but I had conceived His seed and became spiritually pregnant shortly after witnessing *The Nativity Story* on the big screen. Months later, I would come to know it. Christmas took on a greater meaning for me in 2006. That year indeed was no ordinary Christmas. Long after the season was over, I entered into a new season, but I was still celebrating Christmas! I had experienced the blessing and very presence of our God. I did not want to move on from this most special time. At that moment, I was carrying a part of God's promise and a piece of His glory in my womb. It was the best Christmas gift I could have ever received. The perfect gift if ever there was one!

Christmas began in the heart of God. It is complete when it reaches the heart of man. —Author Unknown

Do Whatever He Tells You!

What a privilege! I had been entrusted and endowed with a beautiful gift, but somehow I knew this was not my gift to keep. Now that I was pregnant with God's divine glory, what was I to do next? How and when would this gift come to be? Would I carry what was growing inside of me to term? "What did Mary do?" I asked. If she were here, what advice would she give me? "Do whatever He tells you!" I could hear from this woman of so few words. Did you know that there are only seven occurrences of Mary speaking in the Scriptures? Ironically, those were the last recorded: "Do whatever He tells you (John 2:5)!" Surely this was something that was much easier said than done. As profound as this must sound, was it really so simple for her? Are God's instructions so effortless to carry out? These were only a few of the questions that rushed over me.

I read the Scriptures in Luke over and over, and each time, God gave me deeper revelation. I waited with anticipation for the release of *The Nativity Story* on DVD. Finally, the following spring, with my copy in hand, I watched the video again and again as I had done with the Scriptures. God continued to give me more and more, and the seed of revelation grew in my heart. In addition to what He was making known to me in His Word and through the movie, He unveiled even more in sermons, in songs, and even in the conferences I attended. Inspiration and affirmation swept over me. I could clearly see God's vision of what was to be. "But how," I still wondered. In the words of Mary, I asked God, "*How shall this be?*" (Luke 1:34). How had she done this? I wanted very much for the act of my becoming pregnant to be the destination, but I was starting to see that it was just the beginning of an amazing journey. That seed which the Lord had sown in my womb would have a life of its own before it could be birthed. And Mary was my example of how it would come to be. After all, she had done it.

Perhaps you, like me, have asked God to show you the plan He has for you and the steps you should take to accomplish it. You too are asking, "How, Lord? How will this impossible thing you've asked of me be done? How will it come to pass? *How shall this be?*" The crucial question for so many. If only He would give us a glimpse into our future and show us what to do. With Mary's example, God has given us more than a glimpse of how to walk with

Him and how to honor Him even when we don't understand the particulars of what He wants to accomplish through us. Her life story—layered with guidance, motivation and evidence—unfolds as she crosses into her own calling. Her story convinces us of God's promises and gives us clarity of purpose which enables us to set out on a course of action for our personal date with destiny. Her account in the Scriptures is as applicable today as it was then and gives validity to the old adage, "*Seeing is believing!*" Our Father wants to do so much more than tell us that impossible things are made possible; He wants to show us.

Just as He did with Mary over 2000 years ago, God set me on my own personal journey of trusting and obeying Him to believe, bear and birth His calling in my life. This writing project was His response and my answer to how He would do it. I hope it will become yours too!

With Mary we miss the point when we focus only on why she was chosen. —Amie Dockery, When Women Worship

Asked and Answered

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" We will see for ourselves as we journey back in time to discover all that was revealed in and released from this town in Galilee. Mary asked one question, "*How shall this be?*" A question so full of expectancy she asked and God answered. His response to her, though a miraculous one, would be more than a single event but an experience. And it was. It was a process—one that is still as alive and miraculous today as it was when He presented it to her, a process that led Mary on the journey of her life.

The fifteen chapters of this book survey the landscape of the distinct experiences that unfolded on the journey that Mary and the Lord shared so long ago. As you set out on your own journey, bear in mind that although the question of "how" is being addressed in the example of Mary's journey, you should not approach this book as a "how-to-guide." Understand this is the path along which Mary walked with the Lord. She not only made this journey in her heart and mind, but she made it physically. It is parallel to the path I have walked and am continuing to walk. I believe these "experiences" are very likely to be revealed as you carry out your promises and purposes

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with the Lord. Any of these fifteen experiences could reveal themselves (in no particular order) when it comes to your unique path towards purpose. The objective is not to expect an “easy-to-follow” or “step-by-step” plan, but to perceive with the help of the Holy Spirit which experience you are walking out in the various seasons of life.

Remember it’s all about the journey—the destination is the cherry on top. Let God release His grace and power to you on every page. Draw upon what you are experiencing to become more intimate with Him as He reveals Himself to you. The reality is that the greater your communion with God, the more likely He will reveal these aspects and the more likely you will be able to recognize them. Similarly, the more you recognize these experiences and allow God to take you through them, the more intimate you become with Him and the more of Himself He reveals. This is the place where your *faith builds*, your *courage grows*, and your *obedience solidifies*. This is also the place where you become a woman who can “do whatever the Lord tells her!”

The chapters portraying the fifteen experiences are divided into three parts. Each part embodies an all-encompassing truth that has already been proclaimed in the very Scriptures that cover Mary’s story. They are:

PART 1: You Have Found Favor With God!

PART 2: Nothing Is Impossible With God!

PART 3: Blessed Is She Who Has Believed!

As I walked out my journey of writing this book, which also took me along the path of Mary’s journey, these three truths were recurring themes that stood out all throughout. It became clear to me that the three truths essentially form the foundation upon which dreams do come true. They exemplify the past, present and future workings of God to fulfill His calling and promises in your life. 1) *You have found favor with God* (past truth). This has already been done for you and for me. All you have to do is receive it! 2) *Nothing is impossible with God* (present truth). Every day, now and always, God is able to do any and everything through you. All you have to do is believe it! 3) *Blessed is she who has believed* (future truth). For it will most certainly be accomplished and will come to pass. All you have to do is achieve it!

As you walk this journey with Your Creator, declare these truths for yourself. He has already declared them for you. Pray these statements of faith back to the Father until you have not only believed them, but have lived them.

In each chapter, there are a few special elements to take note of as it relates to each of the fifteen experiences. They include:

DEFINITION: On the title page of each chapter, there is a definition of the chapter title itself. Each title conveys a deeper meaning relating to the experience. Carefully read the titles and consider how the definition can be applied to your daily life.

GLIMPSE: Short but powerful, the glimpse delivers a foretaste of what's to come in each chapter, all the while stirring your heart and awakening your mind to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Each one will leave you with a greater sense of expectancy of God and of yourself.

SPEAKING OF MARY: Each chapter begins with a captivating narrative of Mary's life as it may have happened. Contemplate every word and phrase to see how God's plan for Mary unfolds right before your very eyes and how your own comes to life.

SCRIPTURE: Nested within the *Speaking of Mary* section of each chapter is the specific Word of God in bold lettering which moves Mary's biblical narrative forward scene by scene. As with Mary, it has the power to conceive and birth the promises and purposes God has placed in your womb.

PRAYER: The end of each chapter offers a time of prayer, granting you the awesome privilege to go before God. Surrender yourself and allow your spirit to supernaturally connect to the words, regardless of what you are feeling or seeing in your life.

Often, I became excited and hopeful about what God was doing while writing this book. I found it hard to believe He chose me to do this and that He believed I could do it. My anticipation grew with every step of discovery,

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because I finally knew it was God who was causing all of it to happen and who would bring it to completion. So I began to expect Him to do more with each step I took. I pray you too will feel these things and more as you move closer to stepping into your destiny. I pray that all your heart, mind and soul will be prepared to receive the wonder that awaits you. I pray that you will bathe yourself and your dreams in prayer and allow God's timing to be your timing in your own birthing process. Get ready! It won't be long before you go into labor and are ready to deliver!

...we should become spiritually pregnant from our intimacy with the Lord. Pregnant with vision; pregnant with desire to serve Him; pregnant with something that the Lord desires to manifest through our lives. This spiritual pregnancy will ultimately give birth to something. We, as the bride of Christ, become the ones who give birth to God's will here on earth. —Richard A. Murphy, Putting Yourself in the Hands of God