

Receive God's Gift for You

By Bobby Schuller

You know today I just want to remind you of something you already know. You are brave, you are courageous, and today I believe that you're going to break the back of whatever nagging fear it is that's in your life because today you're going to take action. And action is the thing that causes us to finally recognize that the thing we're afraid of doesn't have as much power as we thought. I want you to know I believe in you, that this church believes you, and most importantly, God believes in you. And He has a promise that He's holding out to you. And that promise for you is available, but you have to respond. You have to respond. You have to step out in action. I believe that you are very much like a train that is not moving. Sometimes a train, it's so powerful and strong and can do so much, but a little two by four on the track can be one thing that keeps that train from moving. That train's going 90 miles an hour, it can plow through a brick wall, but sometimes to get going, just the smallest thing can keep it from fulfilling what it's meant to do and be. And I think that you're like that.

And maybe you find yourself in the rut. Maybe you feel like I know that God has put this great thing in my life, but I'm afraid and so you've gotten comfortable in whatever safe place it is that you are now and I want to remind you that is not you. That you are so much bigger,

stronger, and bolder and badder than that. And today you're going to break that. You're going to break that by taking action. Amen?

So today we are talking about inheriting the promises of God by overcoming our fears through action. I remember when I was a kid, maybe eight or nine years old, and we had this hill down the street from our house. We called it suicide hill. It was this humungous hill, it was straight down, and I was the guy in the group of four, and I'm embarrassed to say it honestly, even now it's stupid, but I'm embarrassed to say I was the guy that was too afraid to go down. All the kids would go like straight down. I'm like no, sorry, I'll see you at the bottom, I'm going around the long way. And I would do that every time, and it got to the point where I was thinking about the stupid hill all the time. I was feeling embarrassed by it constantly.

And so one day I decided to just like on my own go down suicide hill. So I rode my bike and I stood there looking up and it was like, you know (FALLING SOUNDS) I mean like you could just.. it seemed so high and crazy.

So the first thing I did is I ran down it on my feet instead of on my bike. I was like okay I can handle this. And then I decided to go down suicide hill on my bike very so slowly, like fast enough that I wouldn't fall, but slow enough that I could handle it. And when I got to the bottom of that hill, man can I tell you I was on cloud nine. I overcame suicide

hill. I overcame it. And so I went back with my friends and we finally go down suicide hill, no problem.

So a few weeks ago, I'm back in my old neighborhood in San Juan Capistrano, and I'm going on a walk and there all of a sudden, as I turn a corner, is suicide hill. Suicide hill. It had to be.. seriously it had to be about 12 feet high, something like that. It was so short and small, and now as an adult where I am now as a grown man, I looked at this suicide hill, it's a little taller than I am now, and I remember thinking like man when I was kid, that thing looked like suicide hill. It looked like this thing; it was impossible to overcome. And now looking at it, it looks so small in comparison.

And isn't life like that? Isn't life like that? When we face these things when we're younger, as we go on in life we look back and we remember that was hard, that was difficult, that was scary, but very often in life we look at the things we have to face now and in comparison it's like nothing. I still remember my first sermon was to like 14 people, and I couldn't breathe, I was scared, I had to like move stuff around, and now I look back and I think how silly. Whatever it is, your profession is, or in your life, or in your family, there are these things that we realize that by taking a step of action, by really facing our fears and breaking the back of our fear, we grow as people. We become braver, we become less scared, and we are more ready for what life and indeed God has to throw at us.

I want to start in this message by really looking at two stories, two Christmas stories. How both Zachariah and Mary were given a message from God around the same time. In the first chapter of Luke, there's this priest named Zachariah. He's an old man. And he and his wife never had any children, and they always wanted it. And for women back then, it was like kind of a big shame to not have a child. You were looked down upon and people said you were cursed, so it's already hard enough for a woman who wants to have a child and not be able to have a child, but then it was layered on with this shame component.

And here's Zachariah in the temple. Now picture the temple back in this date. It was humongous. If you've ever been to Israel, it is just so grand. Even today, if it was still built, would be a humongous building, but in those days, in days when there weren't very many big buildings, it was monumental. It was unimaginably big. It was another world. And there would usually be hundreds, sometimes thousands of people gathered in the plaza of this temple. And it was every priest' dream to burn the incense. So one day, and probably maybe once, maybe twice in your whole life, you'd be picked as a priest to go into the temple and to burn the incense.

So here's Zachariah. The lot falls on him; probably the first and only time in his whole life as an old man now that he's going to go into the temple and do this burning incense thing. He walks up the stairs. The bible says that people are praying for him and praying around him.

There might have been singing songs or chanting something, so imagine just this heavy (WHOA, WHOA, WHOA) I mean thousands of people doing this as he's ascending these stairs.

And he goes into this room and he closes the doors. And there is an angel and the angel says essentially Zachariah, your dreams have come true. I've come to tell you your wife is going to have a child and his name is going to be John, and he's going to usher in the Messiah as a forerunner. And Zachariah's response is how can I be sure of this? Now this really makes the angel kind of angry because the angel is like what do you mean! You're like in the temple, it's like a once in a lifetime thing. No, he didn't say that. But there's this sense that the angel is like are you serious?

So he says you know what? Zachariah, you're going to be quiet until your son is born, and the story goes that Zachariah remains mute until his son is born and his first words are his name shall be John. And this is an important story for us because Zachariah's first response is to reject the very thing he wants when God promises it will be his. The thing he's desired for his whole life, God finally says today is the day, and Zachariah says how can I be sure of that.

Now Mary, just after this, it comes right after in the first chapter of Luke. Mary then, when she is told, she is probably somewhere between 15 and 19. She's definitely a teenager, a young girl, engaged to be married. She's with the love of her life, Joseph. She's so thrilled; the

wedding plans are getting ready and all of a sudden this angel shows up to ruin her life. You know this angel comes and says look Mary, you're going to be pregnant and I know you're a virgin, but you're going to be pregnant now and your son is going to be the Messiah that's going to save the world. And Mary's response is this: I'm the Lord's servant. Let it be done.

So I just want to show these two things, right? For Zachariah, God promises Zachariah everything he's ever wanted and dreamed, and Zachariah's response is to say I don't believe, basically. And so the angel says okay you're going to be quiet so you can't speak doubt and negativity into what I'm promise you. I'm just going to overcome all your weaknesses by force so that John can be born. So in other words, Zachariah has everything to gain from God's promise and rejects it. But Mary has everything to lose. She's going to have to go to explain to her new fiancé, look I'm pregnant, but I'm a virgin, I promise. Right? Right? She's going to be the shame of her community. I mean this is literally something that would ruin your life as a teenage girl in Israel. And she just says I'm the Lord's servant.

So Zachariah has everything to gain and he rejects God's promises, but Mary has everything to lose and says I trust God! Let it be so. I want that heart. I want to have the heart of a person that even when God says something's going to happen for His good and it's going to somehow be bad for me, I'm going to trust Him that in the long run it's going to be

totally worth it. I want to be the kind of person that when God offers me an opportunity, a promise, a dream, something great, my first response is yes Lord, I'm your servant, all things are possible for those who trust God. And that's the kind of person you are, and I believe it.

So most of us, if you find yourself responding in fear when God asks you to do something, well congratulations, you're a human being because when God asks you to do something, it's usually scary. And the way that we respond to the scary things that God calls us to do is very often we reject God's promises. Maybe this is you. Maybe sometimes you say when God gives you a dream or a calling, you say to Him, well God don't you know that's impossible? Maybe that's you. God, that's impossible. I always feel like God wants to say, yes, I know. All things are possible for him who trusts in God.

Maybe you say God, I'll do it but I need clarity. And that's the way you reject God's promise. You say I'll do this thing God, but I need you to fill in the blanks here. I need to know how this is going to go from beginning to end. I can trust you, but I need you to fill me in on the details. God won't give you clarity. God wants you to say yes or no, and if you say no, He'll just move on to the next person.

Or maybe you say God, don't you know.. we reject His promises in our fear by saying God, don't you know I'm the responsible one. My family depends on me to worry. If I don't worry, they're going to have to worry because I'm the only one that takes care of all this stuff. Don't find

your purpose in worrying, by the way. Can I just say that? Sometimes we find a purpose, a meaning in life by being the worry wart. Trust me, your family doesn't need you to worry more. Trust me. In fact if you read their hearts and minds, they'd probably wish you worried less and laughed more, and did more fun things.

So we reject God's promises because, well, we're responsible, and doing what God has called us to do, that is too risky and too irresponsible. I have doilies to take care of, and plates to wash. Friends, I want to tell you that when God asks you to do something, it's going to be an amazing thing He asks you to do, and it's going to be scary, but it's going to be so worth it, and when He calls you, I want you to say yes, Lord. Yes, I am your servant and I trust you, and man, that is scary, but I'll do it.

I think that for all of us, our temptation is to say all the reasons why everything is impossible, why I'm responsible, why I need more time, why I need to just go and bury my father, or all the other things that we want to say. Let me go do these things when God is saying come, do it now. Great things lie ahead. We need to become the kind of people that say anything is possible with God. We need to become the kind of people that say I trust God. We need to become the kind of people that say I believe that all things are possible to him who trusts in God.

Jesus says in Mark 9 chapter 23, there is a man who brings his son to the Lord, and he says Jesus, if you can, would you heal my son?

And Jesus' first response is 'if you can?' He says everything is possible for anyone who believes. Do you believe that? I do. And to believe, to believe or to have faith is not a feeling. I don't even think it's an idea. At its heart, faith is an action. Faith is proved in what you do. Faith is released, not owned. Faith is a gift from God. Oral Roberts used to say people say to me all the time, pastor Roberts, or brother Roberts, I've got lots of faith. And I used to say to them, I don't care if you have faith, I want to know do you release your faith? Oral Roberts taught, and I think this is right, that faith is not something that's possessed, it's something that's released. It's released. I don't care how much faith you have, I care about what sort of faithful actions you do. And I believe you are braver, more courageous than you know, and I believe you have so much power within you, so much life and so much to give to the world, but fear is the one thing standing in your way. Your desire to be safe, your desire to be comfortable just might be ruining your life. And today I want to encourage you that God's calling you to do something great and to step out in faith and do it. Do it! You'll be so glad you did, even if you fail, it'll be one step closer to victory.

God's promised us, found in Isaiah chapter 61. When Jesus goes into the desert and He comes out of the desert, He opens up the scroll in the synagogue and He essentially says this is me. So "the spirit of sovereign Lord is on me because He's anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." Are you poor? "He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted."

You brokenhearted? “To proclaim freedom to captives.” You feel like you’re captivated by addiction or poverty or sickness? “Release from darkness for the prisoners. To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God to comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes. The oil of joy instead of mourning. In a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor. Instead of your shame, you’re going to receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace you’re going to rejoice in your inheritance. And so you will inherit a double portion in your land; an everlasting joy shall be yours.” Amen to that.

Christ has come for you, and these are the things that Christ offers to those who trust in Him. Christ is offering you an amazing calling, but that calling requires that you step out in action, that you break the back of your fear, and that you embrace the very brave and courageous person I know you are.

When you follow Jesus, He always calls you to do something uncomfortable. When you follow Jesus, He usually calls you on a type of pilgrimage that’s going to form you and shape you. That will be difficult. To analogize this, there’s a great book called *Hero With a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell. It was written in the 1920’s and he talks about this

thing called a mono-myth. In other words, that all myths are great stories, but great adventures have the same sort of ideas.

And actually this book has been one of the biggest influences on guys like J.J. Abrams, George Lucas, I could go on. But people who have essentially.. J.K. Rowling.. they've taken this model and applied it to their stories, which have been some of the most successful stories in the world. And he says every great epic story has a very similar pattern. It's not always exactly this, but it's something along these lines. You have the hero, the main character of the story who's living his normal life in his normal world, and all of a sudden a mentor or a catastrophic event thrusts him into a world of wonder. And there in that world of wonder, he or she makes friends along the way and faces a challenge that is bigger than anything he or she thought they would ever face. And this hero is nearly crushed by the challenge. Maybe is crushed and comes back. But in the end, this victory becomes the central thing that transforms the character.

After this great victory, the hero then returns home with boons. Boons means like a gift so the boon is the magic sword, it's the elixir, it's the wings, its whatever. And the hero comes back to his normal home to bring boons and blessings back. And he said like myths going all the way back, like to pre-history, going all the way to Star Wars followed this theme. And so think about it. Aladdin, right? I mean Aladdin is just a, you know, 'gotta steal to eat, gotta eat to live, you're my only friend Abu.'

Who! Right? Aladdin like he's like just stealing stuff, he's a street rat. I don't buy that. Anyway, and Jafar, the mentor, the villain, thrusts him into the cave of wonders where he finds this boon, the genie in the lamp and returns as Prince Ali to engage as a new hero, a new character, right?

Matrix. Neo is living in this world and he gets pulled out of the Matrix and he comes back empowered, right? In Star Wars, Luke Skywalker is just this little nerf herder in the middle of the galaxy and Obi-Wan Kenobi calls him and he returns as a Jedi. I mean you could go forever on the list of movies that follow this rhythm. Beauty and the Beast and Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter. I mean the list goes on and on of myths or stories that capture this idea that you're living your normal, everyday life and something thrusts you into a quest or an adventure. And maybe you didn't choose. You sort of got sucked into something. And there you make friends along the way, and then you face the crucible; you face the dragon, you face the great challenge that nearly destroys you or crushes you. And you get the victory, just barely, by the skin of your teeth and you come back a changed person with gifts to offer those who are around you.

Look there's lots of stories that are written that don't follow that pattern, but the reason that pattern emerges as a success for great stories is it's what we all experience in life over and over! You feel as though life is monotonous, and then you find yourself caught in

something and I will say the calling of God. And He will call you to do something great, and in that greatness, there will be a crucible, there will be a challenge, there will be something you face that's really hard, but you will come through that with a victory and that victory will become a central part of making you who you are. And you will bring boons back. You will bring gifts back to the world which you left to make it better.

And I think many of us, we have that. We're so afraid. We want to stay in the shire, right? We want to take the blue pill. We want to stay in the Matrix. There's this part of us that's like things are going fine. I'm paying my bills. It's all right. And yet there's this nagging sense that God is pulling me out, away, to, for, that there's something I'm supposed to go towards. And yet life is too comfortable and too safe to do something so irresponsible.

Friends, I want to tell you – Jesus is not safe, you're right. There's a story in *Lion Witch and the Wardrobe* where C.S. Lewis who talks about Aslan, who is the Jesus character as a lion, and this girl is trying to understand who this lion is. And she says 'so he's safe.' And one of the characters who knows Aslan says 'oh he's not safe, he's dangerous, but he's good.' And that is who Christ is. He's dangerous. He will call you into scary places, but the soul needs the crucible. Do you know what a crucible is? A crucible is a clay cylinder that's used for refining gold. You put an alloy in there or something mixed metals, but what comes out is gold, shining, pure.

And that is what happens to the soul when we go on these adventures, when we go through these challenges, and I'm just telling you in this season of Advent, you have these promises in your heart, but very often you have to take action to attain them. And God is calling you to do something great. God is not a passive God. He's in partnership with us. He wants us to do things with Him.

So, do something scary before you're forced to do something scary. That's my motto. The longer you sit, as a Christian, the greater chance that you're going to just be totally thrown into something that terrifies you. So just do something scary now. Get it out of the way. Get it out of the way, right? Right choir? Yes, right, okay. Sweet.

Look I'm just going to probably lose a lot of respect all of sudden but I'm just going to admit once and for all. There's some rumors going around and it's true. I do like video games. I don't have time to play them anymore as much as I used to, but man on plane flights, I still enjoy them and I know you're all mocking me, especially if you're much older than me, but I just want to tell you that video games are replacing movies. They are. Maybe not replacing, but there's a game that just came out called Destiny. They had a five hundred million dollar budget, all right? So anyway. I'm feeling really defensive right now. I probably need to just relax.

And I think the reason a lot of young guys like video games and children like video games is because it goes beyond a movie. It's a movie,

a book or a story that you actually get to participate in. It's like you're living in this fantasy. And as I was writing this, it's like the same thing, it's like the epic story. There's three things I learned from playing video games that's just for you, and you don't need to play video games to learn this, all right?

Now this first one only nerds are going to know what I'm saying, but the first one is you need XP to level up. And what I mean by that is in a video game, your character has to do things and XP is experience points. You get points. And as you build something, or kill a dragon, or go into a cave, your character gets experience points, and as that bar fills up, he goes to the next level and he can get new stuff, right? So in life, you have to do stuff to grow. The safer you are, the less you're growing.

Lesson number two: keep trying because there's always a way forward. Look, every video game has a design, has a whole team of programmers that have made it where the way forward is difficult and requires repetition. And it requires persistence and resilience. And life is the same way. Life isn't easy. It requires resilience. It means that when you fail, that you learn from your lesson and you decide to keep going. You believe intuitively that there is always a way forward.

And the last, and probably most important thing I learned from video games, you ready Don? You like games too, don't you? Yes of course. Lesson number three that I learned from playing video games is adversity means you're on the right path. When you find a monster,

when you find a challenge, you find something difficult, it means you're following the right narrative. When you go in a part of a game that has no monsters and nothing going on, it means you're taking a break from the game. It means nothing's happening. When you finally face something big, scary, magical, whatever, you're finally going in the right direction of the narrative that was put there by the designer.

Friends, Tony Campolo said this: I do not want to tip toe through life only to arrive safely at death. How about you? I think God is calling you today to move from being a worrier, to a warrior. It's hard to say that. I should have written that. Worrier with an O to a warrior with an A. Oh I did put it.. oh, I did. Look at that. Yes, that's good.

I'll finish with this story. There's a psychologist named Dawn Huebner and she gave a Ted Talk and she was talking about how she had this son. They had their only son, Eli, and with permission she told this story. And as a kid, Eli was scared of things. He was scared particular of pokey things. He didn't like scissors, and he was really afraid of splinters and bee stings and things like that. So Eli, every boy is scared, but Eli is particularly scared of these things. And so they begin to protect him from these things until he gets a little older. So for example, they stopped going to movies because of the scary parts. They let his hair grow shaggy because he was afraid of scissors. They stopped seeing flowers because flowers have bees. And they avoided wood because wood has splinters.

And it got to this place very slowly where Eli really was afraid to leave the house or do anything at all because he was so scared of what might happen to him. And they continued to, in a way, they didn't recognize that they were supporting that behavior by protecting him from the very things he was scared of.

One day, he really got into history and they decided to go see this historic fort, and while they were there, there was this point where they were spending the whole day there. It was 90 degrees outside. They were exhausted. And they were standing inside this fort building and they sat down and this woman and her husband sat down on a wooden bench and Eli stood there and he had sweat coming down his face. And he wanted to rest but he couldn't sit on the bench because it was made of wood. He's afraid of splinters. And he couldn't sit on the floor because the floor was made of wood. And he couldn't lean against the wall because the wall was made of wood. And crippled by fear, he just stood there and began weeping because he was so afraid of everything. And she says at this time, you would have thought wow this is really gotten out of control, but when you're in the middle of something like that, it just sort of creeps up on you and she said we needed to find help.

And where they landed was cognitive behavior therapy. The idea that action affects how we feel. And so what they decided to do is.. he's now ten, Eli gets into Lego's and they're trying to figure out a way to get him to do some of these scary things. And so one day, they're trying to

get him to go outside and she says to him, you should go outside. And you're not going to get stung by a bee, but if you do, I'll give you ten dollars. And then the dad says the same thing, right? And he needs money for Lego's right? So the dad says the same thing. He says if you go outside, too, you're not going to get stung, but you go outside, I'll give you \$20. She didn't add this to the story, but I know what it's like to be a ten year old boy. I'm pretty sure.. so he got stung, and he made \$30. But I'm pretty sure.. now she didn't say this: that the kid got stung on purpose. I think that the tantalizing promise of \$30 worth of Lego's was just enough to get him to grab a bee and get stung. And by the way, that was the beginning of the healing process for him, and he got over all that stuff, and actually became a fencer later on, so he got over his fear of pointy things!

But I think when we get the promise of a destiny in our heart, when we get the promise of vision, a big vision, a big dream in our hearts, that's the thing that gives us the courage to get stung by a bee on purpose. To just say it's worth it getting hurt and suffering to get something great. It's worth the risk, and sometimes it's even worth the cost. And God is saying to you, friend, you are so much stronger, so much smarter, and so much luckier than you think. Pastors aren't allowed to say lucky, are they. But you know what I mean.

And I am calling you to lean into your fear because fear is like.. have you ever seen those Chinese finger traps? Well there's a picture of

one behind me, so you're all right. We think when we're scared that we need to pull away from it, that we need to be safe, that we need to get into a safe place, and like a Chinese finger trap, the harder you pull, the tighter you make it. But instead you need to lean into it. You need to push into that trap. You need to push into whatever fear it is. You need to face your fear with action. And I believe if you do that, you'll never be the same again. If you listen to your fear, you will die never knowing what an amazing person you would have been. But you won't. You are brave. You're courageous and God is beginning to shape in your mind and in your heart a picture for what you can attain if you just act in faith.

Let's pray: Lord, we receive. Lord, we thank you. Lord, I pray that people here would begin to do risky, scary things. I pray for those who are here that are afraid of heights, that Lord they'd go on a roller coaster. I pray for those here that are afraid of TV or being in front of people, they'd begin to speak to public audiences. I pray, God, that you would just challenge us to do scary things; that when various callings come to our life, we have the courage to do it. Lord, thank you. You are trustworthy, you believe in us, and thank you, God, that you call us to do great things, and we trust you, in Jesus' name, amen.