

A Blessing

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] Now, will you turn with me for a few minutes this morning before we move on into the baptism to this chapter that we read together in Luke or Alistair read for us, Puzz read for us in Luke chapter 1. And as we come to this time of year we do tend to focus on the birth of Jesus. I think sometimes it's a shame that we leave the birth of Jesus only for this time of year sometimes. We can look at his birth at any time his life and his death and his resurrection as well of course. But for these next few weeks and we have cards that we're going to give out this evening along with the bulletin sheet for the carol service and with an encouragement for people to come to these Advent services this Sunday, next Sunday, Christmas day and New Year's day. And it will be a theme that will follow through the early years of Jesus. And this morning we're going to look at this chapter where we're, I'm going to focus actually more on, not on Jesus this morning, oh well I am of course, but by looking at his mother as well. Because this is a passage very much about the announcement of the birth. Now we know, don't we, that children, we've seen it this morning and we will see it later and we know in this congregation, they do trigger in us all kinds of emotions and deep longings. Our whole kind of world goes upside down with children in them and sometimes without children in them, longing for children and not being able to have children. The sense of loss or the sense of what we have, the love that they trigger in our hearts, the anger sometimes that they trigger in our hearts as we parent.

The concerns, the memories and as having been children ourselves, we always made, we always retain that, don't we, that kind of child likeness. There's something about us that we like to think is still young and child like in our lives. So children are very significant and I think baptism reflects much of that from both a theological and also a practical and cultural reality in our lives that it reflects that desire at one level for our children's prosperity, for their peace and for their fulfilment. And we know as Christians that we channel that into prayer and into God's protection over them. And along with that we also fear, don't we, we've got a little bit of fear of the world we're bringing them into with all its discord and all its trouble and all its difficulties and we take and recognise their innocence and we're bringing them into a traumatic and turmoil filled world and sometimes as grown ups, as big people we think we can cope but we wonder sometimes how our children will or how they do and what it's going to be like for them. Whether that our own or whether they're the children we've taken vows for in the church or our relations or whoever it might be. But we give thanks and we rejoice today that this is the world that Jesus Christ enters into. It's this world that the child Jesus comes into and it's this world that Jesus comes to bring his blessing into. In verse 42 of this chapter and this is really what I'm going to focus on this morning for a few minutes is the exclamation of Elizabeth, the cousin, the relation, the relative of Mary who Mary goes and visits when she's pregnant and Elizabeth herself is pregnant in her old age and her beyond the child bearing age and when she sees Mary she says to you, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. So right at the beginning of this advent story we've got the announcement from Elizabeth of blessing that Jesus will bring blessing and the blessing will accompany what he has come to do and we're going to look at that for a few minutes. We're going to look at the blessing of what it means. What does God mean when he speaks through Elizabeth here and this announcement of we speak about blessing quite a lot. We use the word quite a lot. Sometimes we use it in a non-religious context and we have different ideas and connotations of what that word means. Maybe if we were to do a straw poll and ask you all what you thought the word blessing meant we'd have lots of different answers. But biblically there's also different answers for the word blessing because there's different words. There's some different words that are used for blessing that the English translates the same way. But the word here for blessing is the word eulogio which is the word we get eulogy from. So it really just simply means speaking well. Eulogy is speaking well of someone and that's the word here and I'm going to keep that definition very tight and speak about that definition this morning in relation to Mary and Jesus. In these remarkable events Elizabeth says, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. That is Jesus who is to be born. So blessed is Mary and then blessed is Jesus. For a few minutes we're going to look at that this morning.

Elizabeth speaks well of Mary, blessed are you. But I'm not going to focus on Elizabeth. I'm going to focus on some words that Jesus or sorry that it comes from heaven significantly from God that is spoken of Mary here. Elizabeth speaks well of her but also heaven speaks well of Mary and in the previous part of this chapter which we didn't read we had the birth of Jesus foretold to Mary and we have the angel Gabriel coming to her and saying greetings oh favoured one or highly favoured one the Lord is with you and he goes on to say that again do not be afraid Mary for you have found favour with God. So these are the word the spoken well words that come from heaven about Mary. That heaven says that she is highly favoured that she is blessed among women. Now what does that mean? It's tremendous isn't it that God brings these words to Mary? You know there could be no higher acclamation no more significant attribution of blessing that would come from our maker from our judge from the one who has the last word on our lives. Isn't that amazing that the one who has the last words in our lives would say this of Mary. And what does it mean? What does it mean when heaven says she's highly favoured she's blessed heaven speaks well of her. Does it mean that she was perfect? Does it mean she was better than anybody else who ever lived? Does it mean that she was faultless? That she was really morally brilliant had nothing wrong with her and that she earned and deserved everything she got because she was special among all other people in the world and that God just loved her and accepted her because of that.

Well can we look at the word of God and the context here because the blessing here that is spoken well of the favour that is spoken of here is really speaking completely the opposite. It's saying that she was someone who was utterly dependent and was a recipient of God's lavish grace. God favoured her with lavish grace. She had earned nothing from God.

She had nothing. She was an uneducated teenage girl in Israel. She was to be pregnant outside of marriage with all the stigma that would have been attached to that even though it was a unique event for her. But she was by her own definition and by her own confession a sinner who recognised her need of a saviour. My soul she says, my magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour. She was someone who knew God as her saviour and who at this point had simply trusted in the promises of the Messiah, the Messiah that was to be coming, the Messiah that she knew all about. I'll speak a little bit more about that in a minute. So she was dependent on God's lavish grace. She was someone who knew that God was her saviour and that she needed a saviour in her heart and in her life. And she was one who not only knew that but she believed that. She believed that in her life as well. In verse 45, Elizabeth says of her and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. She had this practical belief in her saviour God and she lived out that belief. I have no doubt that Mary was unusually insightful. I think for a teenage girl of her time and generation it seems unequivocal that she had outstanding maturity spiritually and she had a great insight. Maybe even uniquely so. But nonetheless she not only depended on lavish grace, she lived out her trust and her humble reliance on God in her life. We see it in the response she gives to the angel.

[10:09] We didn't actually read this but when the angel comes to her and foretells the birth we see that she is humbly touched by what happens. She was told in verse 29 she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this could be.

She was kind of uncomfortable by what was happening. In verse 30 the angel says turn not to fear. So she is obviously afraid by what is happening and she is really maybe struggling a little bit when we all and she also questions how can it be? How can this be since I am still a virgin? How can it be that I will be with child? She questions what God is doing in her life. There is a humility also about her accepting the impossible towards the end of that. She is behold I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word and the angel departed from her. There is this great reality that she is living out her faith. She is trusting in God. There is clearly a morality and an obedience and a learning in her life. She knows a great deal. Go on to say a little bit more about that. I will give you another little hint. But she obviously knows a great deal which again is probably quite unusual because girls of her age at that time and generation wouldn't ordinarily have been educated particularly not in biblical truth and yet she has a huge knowledge of this God that she goes on to worship.

And that is what we see not only in her response to the angel but in her response to what the angel says. We have this glorious hymn which is called the Magnificat and it is magnificent from verse 46 to 56. It is written out in your Bibles as a hymn, as a chorus, as a song and this is her great response to God. And it reveals to us the kind of person she is and it reminds us that not only did she believe and trust but she knew her God and she knew her Savior really well. This is an amazing song and if we looked at it, if we had more time we do not have any time to look at it really today but it is soaked, it is absolutely saturated, it is like a sponge hymn. It is soaked with references to the Old Testament.

Every sentence, every part of it you could parallel. Maybe there is maybe 23 or 24 different references to the Old Testament in this great song, not direct quotes but she clearly knew the God of the Old Testament that she is singing about and speaking about here. She knows his character, she knows his promises, she knows who he is. That is why she can trust in him.

That is why she can believe the impossible because she knows who she is believing. She calls him in verse 49, holy. Verse 50 she calls him merciful. Verse 51, powerful. Verse 54, faithful. So you have got these great references to who God has done that is mighty, that is holy, that is merciful, that is strong and that he is remembered as people. And this is a wonderful theological, insightful, knowledgeable teenage girl that we have here who knows her God personally and who knows the promises of her God. Now I have no doubt that she believed and trusted that the one who was born to her would be the Messiah, would be the Savior.

[13 : 52] I also have absolutely no doubt that she had no knowledge of what that was going to mean. I don't think at any point at this early stage would she have understood what it meant that her son would be the Messiah, the son of God who would live his life and would die the death on Calvary. I will say a little bit more about that this evening in our carol service.

But yet she trusted, absolutely trusted that God was doing what was good and right and proper in her life. And so we see here someone who is blessed, someone who is absolutely blessed.

What is the blessing that she has and what is it that we look for for ourselves and for our children and for we call them that we will baptise shortly? Well we look for peace, don't we, and prosperity and fulfilment. But that's not what Mary had, certainly not in a material sense did she? And that's not at the root of the blessing we're looking for, while it may be part of it. Certainly in this life it might be part of it and we know it will be more fully in the life to come. But to be blessed is to be like Mary, to be genuinely blessed by the one who ultimately has the final say in our lives, the living God, is to need like Mary, His lavish grace. That's what it is to be blessed, is to know and understand that we need His lavish grace. That's the most important decision and understanding that any of us will ever come to, that we see our spiritual need. Like Mary was able to say, my soul rejoices in God, my Saviour, because we need Him spiritually and we recognise that we entrust ourselves to the truth, the truth of God as it's revealed. And like Mary it seemed impossible and for us it seems impossible. How can I possibly believe today it's such a secular kind of world we live in and everything's going against it and yet it's as we know.

Mary knew, didn't she, the song just reveals how much she knew about this Old Testament God, not head knowledge, not intellectual knowledge, she knew Him. She knew Him and as she knew Him as the lavish graceful God that He was in her own heart. And that is tremendously significant for us that we know. You know when we struggle spiritually, it's often because we don't know God, we don't know His character, we don't trust Him, we trust ourselves more and yet here's this young teenage girl showing immense maturity in the knowledge she had of God and can I say it's a huge challenge to us as parents for our children. Now nothing is said in the Bible about Mary's parents. It's amazing isn't it? Yet Mary's parents must have been great people because they took the time to spend with her teaching her about God, teaching her about the Old Testament, about the redemption and the promises and the hopes and the fulfilments. This young teenage girl, tremendous knowledge she had and it must have come from her parents, it wouldn't have come from anywhere else. And what a role we have as parents to play in their baptisable promises that we make. What a role we have to play for our children that we teach them and lead them and guide them and you all have part of that role because you all take vows today to teach. I'm not speaking so much about intellectual knowledge and even theological knowledge although that's ultimately what it is but it's the knowledge of your life. Mary's parents must have lived out a great faith, must have lived out this honest trust that they knew they had and they shared it with their daughter. Amazing. And that's the blessing. That's the blessing we look for, we look for that peace, prosperity and fulfilment that is firstly and foremost spiritual, a relationship of love and forgiveness and hope and a future with God through Jesus

Christ. So that's Mary, very briefly and spent longer than that and they meant to. The blessed is the child Jesus. Blessed, Elizabeth says in verse 42, are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. In other words, blessed is the child Jesus. And again I want to keep that tight description of blessing as it's given to us well spoken of and think of Jesus Christ as the one who is well spoken of. And he's well spoken of in a way that's very different from Mary. Mary was well spoken of by Elizabeth and by God who's highly favoured, who received lavish grace. Jesus is not well spoken of because he needed a Saviour like Mary. He's well spoken of because he is the Saviour. Do you see the difference?

[18:55] It's a slightly different blessing that's given there. That Mary was blessed because she saw her need of a Saviour but Jesus is the Saviour and that's why he's blessed.

He is God the Son and he's God the Son who is born uniquely and who lives in poverty, homelessness and rejection, who left very little human achievement behind, who was betrayed, who was sentenced to death as a criminal and yet who lived a life, short life, that was perfectly blessed, peaceful, prosperous and fulfilled before God. He was never misguided, he was never selfishly ambitious, he never got anything wrong and he was therefore well spoken of by God in a unique way. And if you just flick to Luke chapter 3 to the next chapter 1 verse 22, we have that where at his baptism a voice from heaven comes and says, the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove and a voice came from heaven, you are my beloved Son with you I am well pleased. So that's the blessedness of Jesus that he's well spoken of by God. He's well pleasing to God and God has never been able to say that of any other person in this universe, not of Mary, not of you, not of me, however much we try to do our very best, he can never say with you I am well pleased in and of your own self before God. It only could be said of Jesus because Jesus is the only perfect human being who ever lived. That's our Savior, he is our substitute. But there was one moment there is one moment when Jesus looked for God's blessing, when he looked for God's favour, when he was listening for the favour, the voice of God to say he was well spoken, not at his baptism, but on the cross. But on the cross God said nothing to him. God had no words of favour for him. God had no words of blessing for him, God was silent.

Jesus was forsaken on the cross, why? Because he is there in our place and he has taken our forsakenness and our guilt on his own shoulders and he is dying in our place so that God can bestow on us blessing and favour and grace. So you can say of us who, that we are truly honoured and blessed, not because of what we've done in our goodness and our best efforts, but because what Jesus has done in our place lived his perfect life and yet died in our place and rose again as the fulfilment of God's promise and as the one who has pleased God as our substitute and our saviour. And that's what baptism speaks of. Baptism speaks of that, the washing and the cleansing and the reality of our need of a saviour. We receive the fruit of his perfect life and he takes our guilt and our sin upon himself so that we can know belonging, peace, prosperity and fulfilment now with all the battles and perfectly in the life to come. So we come today to our baptism and that baptism is worked out in

John Callum through the faith and based on the faith of Ken and Chloe today who as parents know the blessing of God in their lives because of what Jesus has done because they too like Mary have received and come to Christ for salvation and the lavish grace of God in their lives. They're not here today to be better than anyone else, they're not here because they think they deserve anything else from God as none of us are and they're not here because of their own goodness and their merits before God but in the name of Jesus Christ made clean the price paid for their sins and a new life that is had in him. A life that seems impossible to live but by the grace of God and the provision of God. They recognise and they see and they know that in God's covenant grace, God's covenant mercy that the promise of this blessing is a promise that they've received but that is made also to their children. To the children of Believers Acts 239 says that the promise is for you and for your children and for those who are far off and there's this recognition that

God works powerfully through families, that he provides this great recognition that blessing comes through family and through, we see it in Mary and her parents and her great knowledge and trust that came through that covenant of family to which she belonged. Now what we remember also is baptism doesn't change Calum, doesn't save Calum, it isn't like we get him done and then he's fine spiritually. We know it's a symbol, we know it's a sign, it's a sign of promise, it's a covenant sign of what God has done in his parents and what God we believe will do through him because of the covenant of grace. What God will do is what we're hoping and trusting in how he will work through them and that as children we believe and we hope and we pray and we live in the expectation that they will come themselves to that living faith that has been symbolized to them through baptism and through their parents. So the great challenge, it's a great challenge and it's a great privilege and it's a great responsibility. It's great for all, for the children as they grow up to know the privilege and the responsibility they have to act on the upbringing and the knowledge and the covenant to which they belong outwardly and it's a great burden, privilege, responsibility for parents, isn't it? What a great influence we have to example and live out not just great faith but great failure. You know parents, we need to be able to share great failure with our children to show them that we're not super beings, we are utterly reliant on God's grace and that there will be times when we need to ask our children for their forgiveness and the humility of recognizing who we are before God. Times when we will need to show them that the life of faith is not the life of relentless triumphalism and glorious deep knowledge but times of doubt and fear and failure and mistakes but that we constantly bring it all back to Jesus for His help and for His forgiveness and for His grace in our lives and that is the blessing that we seek for ourselves and for our children, that peace and prosperity and fulfillment that is foundationally in relationship with

[26 : 58] Jesus which has material outworking but in good times are bad. We look at life of Mary and look at life of Jesus, none of them materially had the blessings that sometimes we think should accompany favor from God but yet they had this wonderful, strong, powerful, humble trust in Jesus which transformed them and so the question that I leave with you and with myself on the basis of this is how do we speak of Christ? Do we speak well of Christ?

You know that word blessing that is what it means, it is speaking well of and of course we long fundamentally and foundationally for God to speak well of us through His Son Jesus you know with Jesus covering us with Jesus our Savior He will speak well of us but also do we speak well of Jesus? As parents do we speak well of Jesus in our homes? Do we speak well of Jesus by our responses and our reactions and our thinking? Do we speak well of Jesus by our priorities and our attitudes to others, to money, to materialism? Do we speak well of Jesus to our colleagues? Do we speak well of Jesus as children? Do we speak well of Jesus by our lives, by our unspoken words, by our lives of faith and dependence on Him? I hope and pray that as we challenge ourselves with His great truth and the person of Mary and the child Jesus that we think of these things today and the

Spirit speaks to us, may that be the case. Amen. Well, by our heads very briefly in prayer before singing. Father God we ask and pray that you would bless your word to us that you would help us to understand its truth and its relevance and its good news and bless what we look forward to going on to do here in Callum's baptism. May it be a blessing for us and for the family and for all who are here for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.