

The Magnificat

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[0 : 00] And before we sing, I'm going to read the passage from which David is going to come and preach to us tonight. The passage is Luke 1 verses 39 to 56.

Okay, this is God's holy word. And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he's looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He's brought down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate.

He's filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He's helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his offspring forever.

[1 : 50] And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home. Amen. Well, we turn this evening to those verses that Chris read for us just a moment or two ago, and our focus on verses 46 through 55.

Advent, Christmas are a time for singing, perhaps more than any other time of the year. Music and song fill our cultural horizons.

Christmas music dominates the airwaves. At this time of year, you can't switch on a radio, go into a shop, without your eardrums being assaulted by all kinds of strange and sometimes esoteric tunes, singing of Christmas favorites, white Christmas, jingle bells, winter wonderland, Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer.

In many churches, we have the singing of Christmas songs, carols, focusing on that first Christmas, upon the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago.

And here, in the opening chapters of his gospel, Luke introduces us to the very earliest Advent or Christmas songs.

[3 : 17] There are four of these, each often known by the first word in the Latin translation. We have this evening, Mary's song, the Magnificat.

Then we have the words of Zechariah, that God willing, we'll look at next week, the Benedictus. And then we have the song of the angels in Luke 2, 14, the Gloria.

We also have the words of Simeon, Luke 2, 29 through 32. That's known as the Nunc Dimitis. We won't actually get to that, so we'll just be looking over the next few weeks at the first three of these songs.

And the first one that we turn our attention to this evening, the Magnificat, Mary's song. One of the most famous songs in all of Scripture. A song that's been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in churches, set to music with trumpets and drums by Bach.

But it was a song first sung by a young Galilean Jewess called Mary. And strangely, perhaps from the perspective of her Jewish culture and society, she was someone who didn't really have a lot to sing about.

[4 : 31] She was probably, in her teenage years, maybe 14, 15, 16, she was engaged, she was unmarried, and she was pregnant. Her character tainted and stained, really, by sexual scandal.

She was facing the ignominy of public shame and disgrace. And nevertheless, she is determined to sing.

And in this encounter occasioned by a meeting with her relative, Elizabeth, she finds a song to sing. And this song is occasioned by Elizabeth's spirit-filled outburst.

We have that in verses 42 and 43 of Luke chapter 1. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Mary is perhaps the most well-known Christian woman in all history.

[5 : 42] In some traditions, she has been almost deified, the Queen of Heaven. In much Roman Catholic tradition, Mary has been elevated and exalted far beyond the position given to her in Scripture.

And while we must be careful not to follow suit, nonetheless, we mustn't overlook and downplay the unique role that this young woman played in the history of redemption.

And Mary's song is, quite literally, a shout of triumph and joy and delight in God. In who God is, and in what He has done, and what He is going to do.

In this song, Mary reflects upon what is happening to her, and what that will mean for her people, Israel, and beyond Israel for the whole world.

Elizabeth's words bring home to Mary the awesome reality and responsibility that is hers. God has broken into her life in an unprecedented way.

[6 : 59] And through this young girl, He is invading His world, and taking to Himself our own flesh and blood. And it's as if the reality of this is driven home to Mary's heart.

And she responds by lifting up her voice to God in prayer and praise. A long time ago, when I was a wee boy in Sunday school, we had a couple of songs that we sang almost every week.

At least, I think we sang them every week. One was known as, there were actions to these songs, but I'm not going to do the actions too much. But one was called Wide, Wide as the Ocean. People of a certain generation will remember these songs.

The other one was called Running Over. Running Over. Running Over. My cups full and running over. I can still remember the actions. Since the Lord saved me, I'm as happy as can be.

My cups full and running over. And here it's Mary, in a sense, whose cup is full and running over. It's an exuberant song of joy that kind of bubbles, overflows, with a spirit of thanksgiving and worship.

[8 : 15] Not without good reason that the old Belgic Confession, in its first article, calls God the overflowing fountain of all good. So much of God in this song that it kind of spills out in effervescent power.

A reflection on the amazing character and ways of God. And in these verses, we're invited, I think, to share Mary's experience and to sing her song.

Part, actually, part of what it means to be a Christian. Like Mary, we too are called to rejoice in God our Saviour. John Calvin wrote, The more we see how great God is, the more we will sense our own sinfulness, which will lead us to magnify all the more his abundant mercy towards us in Jesus Christ.

And I think that's something of what we see here in Mary's song. And for just a moment or two this evening, I want to reflect on that. And what this song's overflowing praises tell us about the God of the Bible.

That we too might rejoice in God as our own Saviour. So, three things, as is my custom. The first, praise the God of saving mercy.

[9 : 41] Look at verses 46 through 50. Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

Behold, from now on, all generations are going to call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. I think one of the fascinating things about this song is the spirit of humility that pervades it.

Mary has no illusions about who she is before God. And indeed, though this is an intensely personal expression of gratitude to God, there is in fact very little of Mary in this song at all.

It's all about God. She magnifies and glorifies the Lord. She looks away from herself to him.

[10 : 46] And the reason she does this is because we're told earlier in the chapter, in verse 28, that she is a woman who has found favour with God. She's received this incalculable blessing to bear the saviour of the world.

This is why future generations will call her blessed. Because God has chosen her for this special and unique task. He has done great things for her.

In his grace and in his mercy, he has seen her and chosen her for this unique role. And yet, though her experience is unique, there is a sense in which her experience can be ours.

Because one of the ways, of course, in which the New Testament speaks of being a Christian is having Jesus Christ to what? To come and to live within us.

Remember how Paul talks to the Colossians of Christ in you, the hope of glory. And this is what happens when someone becomes a Christian. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ comes to dwell within us.

[12:02] And we too, like Mary, find favour with God when Christ breaks into our lives. Notice how Mary speaks here. She speaks of her spirit rejoicing in God, my saviour.

She speaks of God doing great things for me. Christian faith is always something personal. Mary doesn't speak about God in a kind of abstract or impersonal way.

She's awed and amazed by God's grace to her. And she says, and she acknowledges, that this is not of our own making. This is something that God has done.

It's all of his mercy. And she confesses that it's God alone who's our saviour. It's God alone who saves. And the reason that I rescue is needed is revealed in verse 49.

Holy is his name. That's why salvation is required. That's why a rescue is needed. God is holy. The root of that, the idea of that word holy is this idea of cutting or making separate or being distinct.

[13:14] refers to everything that makes God distinctive and different from us. All that sets us, sets him apart from us. All that sets him above us.

All that sets him against us. It's a reference to the otherness of God, his moral majesty. He is a God who, by his very nature, has set himself against all that is evil, all that is wicked, all that is sinful in our lives and in this world.

Because we ourselves are sinners, he has set himself against us. Remember Paul's words to the church in Ephesus, Ephesians 2, 3, we were by nature children of wrath.

Because of our rebellion against God, we are under his just judgment. Our lives are not centered around the living God. Our lives by nature are centered and revolve around ourselves.

And that's why a rescue is needed. That is why an intervention is needed. And that's why it's a rescue that only God himself can accomplish. He alone is a God of saving mercy.

[14:27] That's why Jesus came into the world. That is why, in fact, Matthew tells us he was given the name Jesus. He will save his people from their sins.

And this is what Mary is rejoicing in. God in Jesus Christ, drawing near to rescue and to save and deliver a holy baby, come to bring us to a holy God.

Mary knows herself to be a sinner. A fallen daughter of Eve. She is no semi-deified Madonna.

She is no immaculate co-redemptrix. She stands along with us as one who needs the redeeming work of the Son she is going to bear.

And it's clear as we read the text that Mary is someone who's tasted something of God's mercy for herself. She exults in it.

[15:28] She rejoices in it. Let me ask you tonight, what are you rejoicing in? What are you celebrating? Are you rejoicing in God as your Savior?

Are you rejoicing in his saving mercy, in his amazing grace, that Christ is in you, the hope of glory? Paul writes to Titus, Titus 3, 4 and 5, when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.

Christian salvation is all of God's mercy. It's all of God. Not because of anything we've done, because of our good deeds, or good life, or religious devotion, morality, church going, not because of anything we've done, but only because of what Jesus, the Savior, has graciously done for us.

Christianity is all about praising the God of saving mercy. Praise the God of saving mercy. That's our first point. Second point, verses 51 to 53, praise the God of revolutionary power.

Look what it says. He has shown strength with his arm, scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brought down the mighty from their thrones, exalted those of humble estate, filled the hungry with good things, and the rich is sent away empty.

[17:08] So Mary continues to reflect on the ways of the God of the Bible. Not only a God of rescuing mercy and love, he's also a God of revolutionary power.

And through the prophet Isaiah, God says, some of you will remember this text, Isaiah 55, 9, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than

your thoughts.

Here is the God who is beyond us. Here is the God who turns things upside down. The God who upsets the values and the ideologies of this world.

He's a God of power. Scattering the proud, bringing down the mighty. We've been thinking that in our morning services as we look through the book of Daniel.

The God who exalts the humble, feeds the hungry, sends the rich and the wealthy away empty-handed. You see, he's a God of great reversals.

[18:09] That's what we see in these verses. And when we look through the scriptures, it's exactly the kind of God that we are confronted with on page after page after page.

This God of revolutionary power. I think John F. Kennedy was once asked why he wanted to be in the White House. Because, said Kennedy, this is where the power is.

He couldn't have been more mistaken. The power does not reside in Washington or Moscow or Beijing or London or Brussels.

The power does not rest in the hands of media moguls and faceless multinational corporations. The power lies with him whose arm is mighty to save and to deliver his people.

He opposes the proud and the arrogant. Proverbs 15, 25. The Lord tears down the house of the proud but maintains the widow's boundaries.

[19:15] Isaiah 2, 12. The Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low.

James 4, 6. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. He brings down the mighty and the powerful of this world. Remember Isaiah's words.

He brings princes to naught, reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

He's the God who sends the rich away empty. There's a parable that Jesus tells later on in this gospel, the parable of the rich fool.

Remember how the man amassed a fortune and then sat back to take life easy, to eat, to drink, and to be merry, and God spoke to them.

[20:20] These words to that man, you fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?

Jeremiah 9, 23, The God who exalts the humble, and fills the hungry with good things, the God who satisfies his people, the God who is everything to his own.

Nothing compares to him, not money or position or power. All of these things pale in comparison to the living God.

Later on in this gospel, Jesus will say, reclining at a Pharisee's table, For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

After that famous story of the Pharisee and tax collector going to the temple, Jesus concludes with these words, I tell you, this man, the tax collector, the one who cried out for mercy, went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

[21:54] For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. That is the revolutionary power of the gospel. Those who think they have everything in the eyes of this world, those that are full of themselves, their own achievements, those that think they have absolutely no need of God, or who think that God owes them, they are brought low and sent away empty.

D.L. Moody once said, Christ sends none away empty, but those who are full of themselves. It's those that have nothing that God calls and invites.

We say it often, don't we? All you need is nothing. Nothing, we sing the words, don't we? Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross, I cling.

It's believing in Christ alone, out of a sense of our need, our unworthiness, our moral bankruptcy, that indicates we've truly understood and experienced the power of the gospel in our lives.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. In that sense, it is never for the strong and the wise and the powerful and the proud, because in their strength and wisdom and pride, they cannot see the living God.

[23:35] He's the God who quite literally turns the world upside down. He reverses the values and expectations of this world. And here his power is being made known in this young Jewish girl, in a

baby born in the squalor of a Bethlehem stable.

Indeed, a power that will be made known at the end of this gospel, in the weakness and brokenness of a bloody crucifixion. For ultimately, it is at the cross that we come to truly see and experience the revolutionary power of God, the power of his love, the power of his forgiveness, and the power of his grace.

Again, do we know anything of that power? Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, he says, the word of the cross is folly, foolishness, to those who are perishing. But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

So many look at the cross and shake their heads. They laugh. They mock. It means absolutely nothing.

Utter foolishness. Friend, what do you make of it tonight? Is it for you the power of God? Have you encountered for yourself, like Mary, the God of revolutionary power?

[25 : 03] Well, time's disappearing. Praise the God of saving mercy. Praise the God of revolutionary power. Thirdly, finally, quickly, praise the God of covenant faithfulness.

Verses 54 and 55. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

One of the key features of Mary's song is the way in which it draws so heavily from the language of certain Old Testament passages. Commentators believe there are around 15 direct Old Testament references in just these few verses.

And perhaps the most notable and significant of these is Hannah's song that we find in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verses 1 through 10. There's a very strong correlation between the two.

And Mary's language here is informed and shaped directly by the Old Testament scriptures. Her entire view of God is not surprisingly rooted firmly in that revolution that we have in the Hebrew Bible.

[26 : 13] And these final verses of the song are no different. She reflects on God's covenant faithfulness. The God who has committed himself to his servant Israel.

The God who's always true to his word. We've been working through Hebrews 11 in the evening and this theme is just repeated again and again and again. Here is the God who remembers the promises he made to Abraham way back in the book of Genesis.

Here is the God who does not forget. And what were the blessings of that covenant that God offered to Abraham? Well beyond the promises of people and the land God offered Abraham a relationship with himself.

I will be your God. You will be my people. All of the history written in the Old Testament is a consequence of these words. Showing us what it is for a people to have the living God, Yahweh, as their God.

And that is at the very heart of the Abrahamic covenant. It lies at the very heart of God's covenant of grace. He will be God to his people. It lies at the heart of the gospel.

[27 : 30] Heart of the Bible story. At the heart of the Christian faith. It's about coming to know God for ourselves. Sinful, broken human beings being brought to the living God to worship him, serve him, and enjoy him forever.

And yet, there was something more in that covenant with Abraham, wasn't there? It was that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him and his descendants. Abraham and his seed would be a channel and blessing, of blessing and salvation for the whole world.

This intimate knowledge of God is for all the peoples. Because God is calling, gathering a people for himself from every tribe, people, nation, and language.

He's building his church. He's true to the promises of salvation and redemption made from of old to Abraham and his descendants. And now all the nations of the world will be blessed through Abraham's family, because now the promised saviour has arrived.

He's drawn near. Because it's in Jesus that those, God's ancient covenant promises find their fulfillment. It's in Jesus that God's revolutionary power is experienced.

[28 : 51] It's in Jesus that God's saving mercy is made known to the world. And so it's no coincidence, I think, that in the Bible, God's people are called to be a people of praise.

Jesus. In his first letter, the Apostle Peter describes the calling of the church in just those terms, doesn't he? To proclaim the perfections or excellencies of God, the God who has brought us from darkness into his marvelous light.

And actually, that's not a bad description of this song. It's a proclamation of the excellencies of God's character. Yes, it's Mary's song. But through faith in Jesus, it can be ours as well. And it becomes ours when we see that his mercy is for us, for people like us. And we come to surrender our lives to him.

And so we're able to rejoice in Jesus as our Savior and our King. There's an old Scottish paraphrase of Luke chapter 4 that begins, Hark the glad sound.

[30 : 03] The Savior comes. The Savior promised long. Let every heart prepare a throne and every voice a song.

The old Swedish proverb says, Those who want to sing shall always find a song. And here in Luke 1 we have the song who wants to sing it.

Let's pray. Lord, our prayer this evening is very simple.

That we would know you as our God. that we would know you as our Savior. And that we would be counted amongst your people declaring your perfections and excellencies for you have brought us by your grace and mercy from darkness into your marvelous light.

May that be true for each one of us this evening. As we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.