

After Darkness Light

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

The Magnificat
December 12th, 2021
Luke 1:46-56
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I'd invite you to open it now to Luke 1:46-56. This morning we are taking a look at what is sometimes called “the Magnificat” – or “Mary’s Song Of Praise”. It takes place about 3 months after the story we looked at last week – what is sometimes called “The Annunciation” or “the announcement of the birth of Jesus” by the Angel Gabriel. In Luke 1:26 it says:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. (Luke 1:26–27 ESV)

So Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus to Mary in the SIXTH MONTH of Elizabeth’s pregnancy with John the Baptist – we looked at that story two weeks ago. Now here in Luke 1:46-56 Mary is visiting Elizabeth, her kinswoman, just before the birth of John – which we presume would happen in the 9th month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. So Mary has been thinking about what Gabriel had said to her for 3 months.

That’s where this song comes from.

Is it inspired by the Holy Spirit?

Of course!! No doubt!!

But it also arises out of 3 months of wonder, meditation and prayer – thanks be to God!

So let's listen to it. This is one of the most famous songs in Christian history – right up there with the songs of Miriam and Hannah in the Old Testament. I want to appreciate this song – but then having done that, I want to use this song to correct and TUNE our hearts as we make our way toward Christmas. I'll begin reading at verse 46. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on
all generations will call me blessed;
49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of
their hearts;
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble
estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”
56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.
(Luke 1:46–56 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

The song is called “The Magnificat” because that is the first word in the Latin version of the song – it is translating what we have here as “My soul MAGNIFIES the Lord”. To “magnify” means to lift up, to exalt, to glory in – so in these verses Mary is telling us what she MOST LOVES about the Lord. Let's take a look at that.

What Mary Loved About God:

The first thing she says is that she loves, she delights, she glories in God's POWER.

1. His power

In verse 49 she says:

“for he who is **mighty** has done great things for me” (Luke 1:49 ESV)

And then later she says:

“He has shown **strength** with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:51–52 ESV)

So POWER, for Mary, has to do with rescue and victory. It has to do with Providence – God's ability to turn history this way and that, to cast down the proud and to lift up the lowly. The Old Testament talks a lot about this kind of power – this is what Miriam sang about in the Book of Exodus. After the crossing of the Red Sea when God helped the Israelites escape from slavery but then caused the waters to collapse upon the pursuing army of the Egyptians, the Bible says:

Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing.

²¹ And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.” (Exodus 15:20–21 ESV)

That's what POWER meant to the Old Testament saints: it referred to God's ability to join in the cause of the weak and the poor AGAINST the great powers of the outside world. It spoke of his ability to protect, to provide and to redeem.

And it spoke to his total MASTERY over the course and trajectory of world history. Mary sang about God pulling people off their thrones and lifting up people of humble estate.

That's what God does!!

He is MASTER OF HISTORY!

He is SOVEREIGN over it all. God says.

“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.”
(Deuteronomy 32:39 ESV)

People in the Old Testament didn't sit around wondering where God was when bad things happen – they asked what he was SAYING when bad things happened.

“Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6 ESV)

They knew that it was always God who was stirring the pot. It was always God who was lengthening and shortening the devil's chain. It was God who threw down the wicked city – and Mary knew it!

She glories in the power of the Lord – and she also glories in his holiness.

2. His holiness

In the Bible those two concepts are inter-related. Look again at verse 49; Mary says:

“for he who is **mighty** has done great things for me, and **holy is his name.**” (Luke 1:49 ESV)

I. Howard Marshall says helpfully here:

“The holiness which is here ascribed to God’s name refers more to his exalted state than to his moral attributes.”¹

When modern day Christians think about God’s holiness we tend to think in terms of God’s moral excellence. God is faithful, reliable, truthful, kind and generous. He is morally perfect!!

And of course – that is true – but that isn’t what holiness meant, primarily, to Old Testament people. Holiness, in the Old Testament, had to do with his “God-ness” – his “otherness” – his EXALTEDNESS. Listen to Psalm 99:2-3 for example:

² The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

³ Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! (Psalm 99:2–3 ESV)

So to call God HOLY in the Old Testament was to celebrate the fact that he SAT ABOVE IT ALL. He was not like us! He was not fallen and corrupt and unreliable. He was GOD. He was EXALTED over the peoples. He sees the whole board, he plays a long game, he is POWERFUL and UNCONTESTED in his judgments.

That’s what Mary is loving here.

“God is doing a thing”, she says, “and no one down here can stop him. Oh, the Pharisees might plot and the Sadducees might scheme – but:

⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.

⁵ Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,

⁶ “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” (Psalm 2:4–6 ESV)

“That’s MY GOD – Mary says, and I love him! He is POWERFUL, he is HOLY and he is MERCIFUL.”

That’s the third attribute that she celebrates in this song.

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel Of Luke* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 83.

3. His mercy

Look at verse 50:

“And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” (Luke 1:50 ESV)

So, even though God, in his Mysterious Wisdom, gives a fair bit of leash to wicked people, even though he might choose to raise up a hostile foreign power to punish the covenant people like he did with Assyria and like he did later with Babylon – even still – in all those seasons, he was merciful toward those who fear him.

“I love that about God”, Mary says.

I love that he is a God of BIG COSMIC PURPOSES – who also keeps an eye out for the lowly. He knows how to cast down the mighty – while at the same time showing mercy to those who fear him.

One of the most amazing pictures of that attribute is found in the Book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 9 the prophet gets a peek behind the curtain, as it were. He sees what goes on in heaven JUST BEFORE an outpouring of God’s wrath upon the city of Jerusalem. Ezekiel 9:1-6 says:

¹ Then he cried in my ears with a loud voice, saying, “Bring near the executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand.” ² And behold, six men came from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with his weapon for slaughter in his hand, and with them was a man clothed in linen, with a writing case at his waist. And they went in and stood beside the bronze altar.

³ Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. ⁴ And the LORD said to him, “Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.” ⁵ And to the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare,

and you shall show no pity. ⁶ Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, **but touch no one on whom is the mark.**” (Ezekiel 9:1–6 ESV)

Are you seeing that?

God is NOT CLUMSY or HAMFISTED in his judgments! He knows how to judge a nation – while at the same time showing mercy to those who fear him. In his hands the SWORD OF THE LORD is as a delicate scalpel.

And Mary loved that!!!

And you should love that – although you should put some thought into whether or not you will benefit from that. According to Mary, his mercy is for those WHO FEAR HIM.

Is that you?

What does it mean to fear the Lord?

Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart is helpful here, he says:

“The fear of the Lord is enjoined throughout Scripture, demanding that God’s people stand always in awe of him, appreciate his supremacy and greatness, fear the consequences of disobeying his will, and not treat lightly any aspect of their covenant relationship with him, lest the consequences be severe or even fatal. Attempts on the part of some in modern times to define fearing the Lord as merely respecting him distort the biblical evidence.”²

So – I ask again – is that you? When judgment falls on this nation – on this culture – will his mercy be MARKED upon you?

² Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* in Volume of 2 of The New American Commentary, (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2006), 240.

Can I be blunt and a little politically incorrect? Some of you need to worry less about the mark of the beast and more about the mark of God's mercy!

Will it rest on you when judgment and disaster fall upon this culture?

Because his mercy is for those WHO FEAR HIM! His mercy is for those are always in AWE of him; who appreciate his supremacy and greatness; who fear the consequence of disobeying his will; who do not treat lightly ANY ASPECT of their covenant relationship with him.

His mercy is for those who fear him.

Mary knew that, loved that, gloried in that and she MAGNIFIED THE LORD because of that.

Her song delights in the power, the holiness and the mercy of Almighty God – but it also relates all of these attributes to the outworking of God's purpose in the coming of Messiah. I. Howard Marshall says here:

“the kind of power which God demonstrated at the Exodus is now demonstrated in the birth of the Messiah.”³

That's the inner logic of Mary's song.

She is saying: “Everything God showed himself to be in the Old Testament he is now SHOWING AGAIN in the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

So let's just quickly notice also what Mary expected Jesus to grow up and do.

What Mary Expected Jesus To Do:

³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel Of Luke* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 84.

The first thing we can see here is that she clearly expected Jesus to grow up and turn the whole world upside down.

1. He would turn the world upside down

Look at verses 51-53. Mary says:

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:51–53 ESV)

Now at first glance it looks here like Mary is talking about GOD – and what HE IS DOING – and that’s true, but it is equally clear that Mary understands God as DOING THESE THINGS through the person and work of Jesus.

So for example Leon Morris says here:

“This section of the song tells of a complete reversal of human values. It is not *the proud* or *the mighty* or *the rich* who have the last word. Indeed, **through his Messiah**, God is about to overthrow all these.”⁴

That’s what Mary expected her son to grow up and do!

And she wasn’t wrong for thinking that – God CONFIRMED this expectation through the Prophet Simeon – do you remember that? When Mary and Joseph were presenting the baby Jesus in the temple Luke says that Simeon came up to them and said:

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed” (Luke 2:34 ESV)

⁴Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 93.

This child is going to be a stumbling block in Israel. Everyone is going to have to deal with him. Some will oppose him and they will be crushed. Some will embrace him and they will be exalted.

Jesus said that about himself:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” (Luke 20:17–18 ESV)

The old world is gone now, Jesus says. God is doing a new thing and I AM the cornerstone of the new creation. If you oppose me – I will crush you. You will not be a part of the human story moving forward. But as for the one who embraces me:

“I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.” (Revelation 3:12 ESV)

So that’s it. Many who are last will be first and many who are first will be last because Jesus is going to turn over the whole apple cart of human history. He is going to shake it and break it and make it new.

“And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Matthew 11:6 ESV)

Mary celebrated this work of re-creation being done through the child who would be Christ the Lord - she knew that he would change the world and she knew that he would favour the poor and the lowly.

2. He would favour the poor and the lowly

Look at verse 52 and 53 again:

“he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:52–53 ESV)

Man, we have a hard time hearing that. I feel like we have some kind of internal iron dome which keeps a passage like this from actually sinking into our conscious thinking. I just read that and yet I guarantee you that most of us don't believe it. You know why?

Because we are the high and mighty. We are the rich and satisfied.

Measured against the rest of the world – how could anyone in this room argue that? When brother Craig gets home from South Africa – you ask him if we are the high and mighty. You ask him if we are the rich and satisfied.

Now – there is nothing necessarily wrong with being rich and satisfied. God doesn't want people to be poor and abused – that's why Jesus came - to lift people UP – so obviously UP is better than DOWN – but of course the question then is what happens to those who are UP? What happens to those who are rich? What happens to those who are SATISFIED?

Will they forget the Lord?

That's the issue.

Certainly, it is dangerous up here – is it not?

Certainly, it is easy for people like us to become high and mighty – and that would be bad because people like that have no reason to long for the return of the Lord.

Jesus did not come, in his first coming, to bless people like that, rather, and this is the third thing Mary says about Jesus here, he came to help his lowly servant Israel.

3. He would help his servant Israel

Look at verse 54:

“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (Luke 1:54–55 ESV)

Remember, Mary has been thinking about the things that were said to her by the Angel Gabriel about 3 months ago in this story. One of the things that Gabriel said was that Jesus would be called “Son of God” – we talked about how most immediately to a Jewish, Old Testament hearer, that phrase: “son of God” would refer to the royal sons of David. In the Old Testament God had promised to treat the sons of David as if they were HIS SONS. So God promised David, when it was time for Solomon to ascend the throne:

“I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:14–16 ESV)

God promised to never give up on the sons of David – he would treat them like his own sons.

When they sinned, he would punish them severely, but he would never reject them utterly as he had the house of Saul.

But.

The problem in the Old Testament is that all the sons of David were terrible SINNERS! They were idolaters! Solomon’s many wives led his heart astray and caused him to worship foreign gods – and all the subsequent sons of David did the same – so as a result, the blessings promised to Abraham – the blessings that were supposed to be released through a royal son of David – remained BOTTLED UP! God was constantly disciplining the sons of David and withholding the blessings he said would come.

The Old Testament HOPE therefore was that one day, a royal son of David would come – who would obey God perfectly from the heart – and that is what Gabriel promised to Mary – and that is what Mary is thanking God for here in this song.

Jesus is God in the flesh doing for Israel what Israel could never do for itself. This is God in the flesh – obeying God perfectly – as a royal son of David – so that all the promises made to Abraham could now be released in the world.

That's what Mary is singing about. She is singing about the GOSPEL. She is glorying in the good news of what the Lord has done through the person and work of Jesus – thanks be to God!

Now before we go I want to test ourselves against this inspired song.

Tuning Ourselves Against Mary's Song

We talked about that in the Sermon on the Mount series. We can use the Sermon on the Mount to test and tune our Christian lives and worship. We can strum these notes and measure ourselves against them. And that's what I want to do here with Mary's song.

When we listen to Mary's song – and the faith and the values it reflects – it suggests to me a couple of urgent adjustments. The first one is this:

1. We need to rediscover the Power of God

Not the way we think of the power of God in the Western, North American church – largely in terms of what God can do for us. When we talk about God's power we tend to speak of him as an all capable butler. He can HEAL any disease; he can PROVIDE for any WANT or DESIRE I may have – but that's not what the people in the Bible talked about when they talked about God's power. They talked about his POWER to move and direct the levers of history:

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will. (Proverbs 21:1 ESV)

They talked about his ALL ENCOMPASSING SOVEREIGNTY:

I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand. (Deuteronomy 32:39 ESV)

That's what they meant when they talked about POWER of Almighty God – and let me tell you friends, they would not have been confused as to the ultimate author of our present calamity.

“Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6 ESV)

“His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power. Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels.”
(Habakkuk 3:4–5 ESV)

You see, when things like that happened, in Bible days, people knew who they needed to deal with. They knew who was speaking and they knew who was demonstrating POWER over the realm of men.

If we are going to be wise and effective as a church over the coming decades, we need to get that vision back. We need a more biblical understanding of the POWER and MAJESTY of Almighty God.

And correspondingly we need to rediscover the place of lowliness and reverence among the people of God.

2. We need to rediscover the place of lowliness and reverence among God's people

It seems to me when I hear Mary's song that the church in North America has this exactly backwards. We have brought God DOWN and we lifted ourselves UP. We think of ourselves as

POWERFUL, ENTITLED and ABOVE IT ALL and we are willing to fight and strive in order to protect our privileged position.

How far we often are from the heart of Mary's song!

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on **the humble estate** of his servant.” (Luke 1:46–48 ESV)

My friends, in the struggles of the coming decades I am more than willing to advocate for justice, equity, fairness and wisdom in the Public Square, but I will not fight a single battle nor strike a solitary blow to maintain my power and privilege in this culture.

Why would I?

The Lord casts down the high and the mighty – he sends the rich away empty! But he exalts those of humble estate – he fills the hungry with good things and his mercy is for those who fear him.

Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.