

Luke

The Magnificat
Luke 1:46-55

With Study Questions

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And Mary said: “My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.⁴⁸ For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth 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 on those who fear Him From generation to generation.⁵¹ He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts.⁵² He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones, And exalted *the* lowly.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 seed forever” (Luke 1:46-55).

Introduction

Sometimes I’m shocked at the things that move me. Some “heroic” athletic display or a twist or turn in a drama I’m watching, or reading can yield tears or the involuntary lifting of my hands. What excites us might be a pretty accurate gauge of self-analysis. It may tell us where we’re investing our hearts. What kind of news might you hear today that would animate you? What news would dismantle you and why?

This morning we read of a teenage girl responding to news. And it would appear that her heart was quite ready to engage in an almost unprecedented exaltation. In Mary we may see an example of what the Psalmists conveyed when he wrote,

Delight yourself also in the Lord, And He shall give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

There is little doubt that this young woman took delight in the Lord and the things of the Lord. This was her investment, an investment of time, prayer, study, conviction. And now the event, of which she would play a

major role, generated the response which will come under our observation. May this be a source of edification for us all.

Review

In brief review, the angel Gabriel had appeared to Zacharias to prophesy the birth of his son (even though his wife, Elizabeth was well advanced in years), who would be John the Baptist. Gabriel also appeared to Mary and informed her she would give birth to the Savior (even though she had not known a man).

Mary would visit Elizabeth when both were with child. Elizabeth would confirm what the angel had said – **“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1:42b)**. Mary’s response comes in the form of what many people think to be a song or a poem or perhaps a canticle.

Preface

It is worth noting that Mary’s song, though far from dispassionate, is full of allusions to the Old Testament. Quotes from Hannah (1 Samuel 1, 2), the Psalms, Isaiah, and more, flow from this young woman’s lips. In today’s culture, Mary would be considered an adolescent (from the Latin *adolescere* – meaning “to grow up”). The Scriptures make no such distinction between teenagers and adults. The teenager is an adult. And here we see a glorious example of a godly teenager.

What we’re reading is often called *The Magnificat* (which is the first word in the hymn in the Latin Vulgate: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, meaning, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord’)¹ is a wonderful example of passion tempered and directed by knowledge and truth. This is not the sentimental rambling. It is rather like a talented artist who has refined her skill through the study of anatomy or architecture.

There are four aspects of her song. First, God’s blessings toward her; second, God’s blessings from generation to generation; third, God’s judgment on the proud; fourth, Mary’s allusion to the covenant keeping God.

¹ William, Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Baker Book House, 1978), p. 101.

I. God's Blessing Toward Mary

And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.⁴⁸ For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.⁴⁹ For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name (Luke 1:46-49).

An Extraordinary Birth

First, we see God's blessing toward Mary. Mary's response is reminiscent, if not taken directly from, Hannah who also had a miraculous birth of the prophet Samuel over a thousand years prior (1 Samuel 2). Mary also would have been aware of the Sarah's birth of Isaac (about a thousand years before that) and now Elizabeth's conception of John the Baptist—all miraculous births—all demonstrating that the power to save comes from God and not man.

But Mary's was unique because she, unlike the others, was not barren. She had not yet known a man. The goal of the other miraculous births was to foreshadow and make the way for her child whose name would be Jesus, for He would save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). The other births still had human fathers; Jesus would be conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Magnifying God

Her soul magnifies the Lord. As the Psalmist records,

I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise *shall* continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make its boast in the LORD; The humble shall hear *of it* and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together (Psalm 34:1-3).

Mary seemed quite ready to apply this Psalm to her own life. In this, she provides a great example for us all. God had given great honor to

Mary, and every generation would call her blessed. Let us not read this in such a way as to conclude that Mary was very happy about being famous.

Her exultation in this generational sense is nothing as vain as mere fame or notoriety. It more has to do with being part of what God is doing in history. I recall studying a passage of Scripture and not being able to find the sermon. I finally looked to Matthew Henry. He was a 17th century theologian who I always found ministerial to me and subsequently I was able to extract a ministerial message from the passage with the help of this great teacher.

When I told my wife about this, she was almost brought to tears with the thought of this British pastor sitting in his study, hundreds of years ago, writing words that so ministered to me, that I was able to use them to minister to others. I tend to think it was this type of thinking in which that Mary rejoiced.

In all of this wonder, Mary would not magnify herself, but she rather acknowledges her “**lowly estate**” and magnifies the Lord. It is here when the Reformers (and others) view Roman Catholicism’s exaltation of Mary as a detraction from the true blessing a study of Mary should genuinely yield.

We are to rejoice in the benefits she received from God in her lowly estate. We are not called here, or anywhere in Scripture, to view her as Calvin would say, to be the “Queen of Heaven, Star of Salvation, Gate of Life, Sweetness, our Hope, and Salvation, etc.”²

In her lowly estate, Mary would magnify not herself, but the Lord, as should we.

But on this *one* will I look: On *him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word*” (Isaiah 66:1,2).

Soul and Spirit

Mary’s soul would magnify the Lord and her spirit would rejoice in her God, her Savior. Two things to note here:

Mary mentioning soul and spirit is thought by some to simply be a poetic repetition of the same faculty. The distinction between soul and spirit, according to this view, should not be made.³ Others believe the

³ Hendriksen would hold this view, p. 103.

spirit ought to be taken for understanding and the soul for the seat of affection.⁴ I wouldn't force the issue at this point.

But I will say this. Her praise toward God, though we see it outwardly, is erupting from a truly pious heart. She is unlike so many famous singers whose testimony includes having sung in the church choir while they currently live a functionally denounced faith.

One thing is clear no matter how we slice up the language – both understanding and affection are contained in Mary's praise. This is something that could only be achieved by one who is well catechized in heart and mind. Knowledge of the promises of God and a joyful expectation of the fulfillment of those promises should be the goal of every believer.

Savior

Mary refers to her Savior. Although this reference to salvation may be applied to salvation from bondage, obscurity or other earthly predicaments, it seems that the context is salvation from sins (Matthew 1:21). This is clearly problematic for the Roman Catholic view of a sinless Mary. Mary rejoiced in being saved from her sins, as should we.

Personal and Corporate

This stanza ends with a very personal outburst. **“For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name.”** From generation to generation there seems to be two dangers: One is an over-emphasis of our personal relationship to the exclusion of a corporate relationship (this perhaps being the dominant error among today's evangelicals). People feel perfectly comfortable in their Christianity apart from any connection with the body of Christ. It is a very self-centered type of faith.

The other is an over-emphasis of our corporate relationship to the exclusion of a personal relationship. We see this among many Roman Catholics who view the church as their mediator rather than Christ. We also see this among Protestants, who might be faithful in church

⁴ John Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries, Harmony of the Gospel (Baker Book House), p. 53

attendance, but don't exhibit the fruit or faithfulness of one who has Christ as Savior and Lord.

It is a good thing to be a baptized member in good standing of a Christian church. But that means very little apart from saving faith. Mary is excited about what God has done for her individually, but quickly moves to the corporate blessings as well.

II. God's Blessings from Generation to Generation

And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation” (Luke 1:50).

Mary's excitement is further established when she sees herself as part of the tapestry of God's everlasting covenant; a covenant Mary was no doubt familiar with as one, first stated directly after the fall (Genesis 3:15) then elaborated upon to Abraham.

And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you (Genesis 17:7).

Bittersweet

There should be an excitement in the life of the Christian, not only in what God has done for us, but in what God is doing in history from generation to generation. Mary's life was to be filled with difficulty and heartache. But her difficulty and heartache would be major players in God's plan of redemption throughout history.

She would witness the crucifixion of her Son. Yet at the same time she would be witnessing the crucifixion of Savior of the world. It was bitter and sweet. Honey on the tongue and sour in the stomach (Revelation 10:10). But the true glory can only be appreciated from one who would have a lengthy view of ministry. We mustn't be overly discouraged with the apparent failures and victories of our singular generation. What the children of God must realize is that all of history, as someone said, is a **“string of God's triumphs disguised as disasters.”**

Mercy

Even though God's goodness, at some level, is known to all men, the mercy of which Mary sings is extended to a specific group. It is extended to those who fear Him. Matthew Henry states,

It has been a common observation that God in his providence puts contempt upon the haughty and honour upon the humble.⁵

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). God should not be viewed as a debtor (someone who owes us) or a contemporary. God is to be feared. Not a servile, slavish fear (1 John 4:18), but a reverent awe. And He will incline His ear to those who in humility of faith, call to Him for deliverance.

Mary will now proclaim the judgment which comes to those who have no fear of God in their eyes, those who trust in the strength of their own arms and minds. These are those whose god does not extend beyond their own skin.

III. God's Judgment on the Proud

He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts.⁵² He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones, And exalted *the* lowly.⁵³ He has filled *the* hungry with good things, And *the* rich He has sent away empty (Luke 1:51-53).

Scattering the Proud

Remarkable that such a young girl would have such a broad world view. God scatters those who are proud in the imagination of their own hearts. Who Mary likely has in mind are people in power who trust in their own innovations, goals and methods, rather than the goals and methods revealed by God's word. Oppression has once again become a

⁵ Matthew Henry, *The Matthew Henry Commentary* (Zondervan, reprinted 1960), p. 1413.

huge word. The true oppressors throughout history are those who view themselves as ultimate, who refuse to bow to a loving, wise, benevolent God.

It would appear that our very best political candidates have lost sight of what it means to govern in such a way as to defer to the only wise God and Savior. What Mary seems to be saying, according to William Hendriksen, is, **“that in the course of history God’s mighty power has repeatedly punished these arrogant people.”**⁶

Rich Yet Poor

God exalts the lowly. He fills the hungry with good things (unlike the bad things the ungodly seek to fill men with). And the rich he sends away empty. This is not to say that it is inherently evil to be rich (how rich is rich?). But when one thinks their riches to be satisfactory, we must consider the words of Jesus Himself in a letter to the church at Laodicea, where He critiques them for thinking they...

...have become wealthy, and have need of nothing, and do not know that you [they] are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17).

In short, as Matthew Henry states, **“They come full of self, and are sent away empty of Christ.”**⁷ Mary grasped the wisdom of men humbling themselves **“under the mighty hand of God”** (1 Peter 5:6). For God, as revealed in Daniel, **“changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings” (Daniel 2:21).**

It would be the Son of Mary who would inherit the nations and break the ungodly with a rod of iron. He would set things straight. Mary rejoiced in what had been done for her and what would be done through history. In Christ, God has kept His promise.

IV. The Covenant Keeping God.

⁶ William, Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Baker Book House, 1978), p. 107.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *The Matthew Henry Commentary* (Zondervan, reprinted 1960), p. 1414.

He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of *His* mercy,⁵⁵ As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever (Luke 1:54, 55).

Jews or Gentiles?

Mary knew the covenant promises of God. She knew what God had promised to and through Abraham, that in him **“all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3)**. Yet when one reads passages like this, passages about Abraham and his seed, they seem to exclude the gentiles. when I read the words of Mary, am I excluded from being in the chorus of her song? We serve the covenant making, covenant keeping God.

Yet the covenant is with Israel, and Abraham and his seed. What about me? What about the church? What about those who would believe in the very Son Mary held within her body? Here is where much of modern Christendom has been robbed. We are made to think and to feel as if the promise is for others, when the Scriptures declare it to be for us. As Paul writes,

And if you *are* Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

The promise made to Abraham was that through Him all the families of the world would be blessed. The Old Testament was always universal in its final aim. And the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) are the recipients of the precious promises contained in the person and work of the blessed Savior.

God has made an everlasting covenant/promise. It is directed toward those who come to God seeking mercy through Jesus. The good news of this mercy has reached our generation – it has reached our ears – may our souls, like Mary’s, magnify the Lord.

Questions for Study

1. What is meant by the Latin term 'Magnificat'?
2. Explain the thought and passion behind this song.
3. What are the four parts we see in this song?
4. What is Mary's initial response to God's favor in her life?
5. Discuss the terms soul and spirit.
6. In what respect is does Mary need a Savior? How does this comport with the Roman Catholic view of Mary?
7. What are the strengths and dangers of corporate and personal relationships with God?
8. To whom does God extend mercy?
9. What does God do to the proud?
10. How can one be rich yet poor?
11. Who is the Israel of God?