

Mary's Song: Luke 1:46-56
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For the month of December we're meditating together on Luke 1-2, the story of Jesus' birth. Last week we focused on Gabriel's announcement to Mary. This morning we'll look at Mary's song in Luke 1:46-56. This song, this hymn, this psalm, is often referred to as the Magnificat. That name comes from the Latin Vulgate translation of this passage, in which the first word is "magnifies"—in the Latin, "Magnificat." This is the song of praise that erupts from Mary's glad heart. She magnifies the Lord for what He has done and what He is doing and what He will do. Mary overflows with joy in God's power and holiness and mercy.

This is a great passage for us to consider as we think about Christmas and what Christmas is all about. Our celebration of Christmas should be a means of worship. Our reflections on Christ's birth should prompt songs of praise like Mary's. My hope is that Mary's song will spur us on in our faith and in our worship.

I'll use four headings to structure our study of these verses. First, I want us to see Mary as an example of faith. Second, Mary as a model worshipper. Third, we'll consider the object of Mary's worship. She's worshipping God. And finally, the content of Mary's worship. That is, the attributes and actions of God for which she is praising Him.

Mary as an Example of Faith

Look back to verses 34-38, which was part of the passage we looked at last week. After Gabriel made this amazing announcement to Mary that she was going to have a baby (and not just any baby, but the Messiah), she responded in a most remarkable way. First, she asked an honest and legitimate question about how this was going to happen, since she was a virgin. Virgin's don't have babies. And Mary was a virgin. So she asks in verse 34, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Now, we have to understand something about this question. This is not a question of skepticism or doubt. Rather, it is faith seeking understanding. You might ask, how do you know that?

I know that because earlier in the chapter Zechariah asked a question that, on the surface, might sound similar. But he was struck mute because of his unbelief. An angel brought Zechariah the good news that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son, John, and he would be great before the Lord. Then in verse 18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years?" The angel, knowing Zechariah's doubtful and questioning attitude, called him on it and disciplined

him for it. Verse 20, “you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”

Contrast that with Gabriel’s conversation with Mary. Mary asks an honest, hopeful question. And Gabriel does not discipline her for asking the question, but gives her a glorious answer about how the Holy Spirit will miraculously bring about this pregnancy.

And then look in verse 38 at Mary’s humble response to all of this. “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” The word for servant is *doulē* (the feminine form of *doulos*), which is better translated as slave. And she uses the same word again in verse 48. Mary gives praise to God because “he has looked on the humble estate of his slave.” Mary recognizes that she belongs to the Lord. He is her master, the Good Master, and she joyfully submits to Him and obeys Him.

In these ways Mary provides us with a wonderful example of faith. She believes the angel. She asks an honest question. She also acts on her faith, going to see Elizabeth in response to what Gabriel had told her. And Mary sings this song of praise to God for what He is doing.

An important clarification needs to be made at this point, because of the way in which many people think of Mary. We need to recognize that Mary is an *example* of faith, but she is not an *object* of our faith. Don’t pray to Mary. Pray *like* Mary, but don’t pray *to* Mary. When we see individuals in Scripture who were greatly blessed by God, it’s appropriate to learn from their lives and seek to emulate them. But to pray to them or worship them or hold them up almost on the same level as Jesus, that’s foolishness.

It is interesting to note that Luke doesn’t give us many details about Mary, which is striking when we compare this with other people who are highlighted in Luke 1-2. Luke writes of Zechariah and Elizabeth that “they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (v. 6). It is said of Simeon in chapter 2 that “this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (2:26). And of Anna, that “she did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day” (2:37). Those are some pretty impressive statements. But nothing like that is said of Mary. She is blessed by God in a unique and wonderful way, but it’s as though Luke avoids saying anything about Mary’s moral virtue or purity lest we think God chose her based on that. Luke wants to make sure we understand that it’s not due to anything Mary has done.

Just like God elects individuals unto salvation unconditionally, He also chose Mary for this marvelous role unconditionally. It was not because of her righteousness that God

chose her for this. It was not because of her impressive prayer life or her many good deeds. It was God's sovereign choice, and therefore God gets the credit and the attention and the worship for it all.

We can look at the evidence of grace in Mary's life, and we can learn from her as an example of faith. But it would be blasphemous to worship her or pray to her. The triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is alone worthy of our worship and our prayers. So we need to have an appropriate view of Mary. She is an example of faith, but not an object of faith.

Mary as a Model Worshipper

In this hymn of praise we see Mary as a model worshipper. Here's where we can continue to learn from her life and her faith. This song is prompted not only by Mary's own pregnancy but also Elizabeth's pregnancy. Right after Gabriel's announcement, Mary went "with haste" to see Elizabeth. And she spent three months with Elizabeth, the last trimester of Elizabeth's pregnancy. It was in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy that Gabriel spoke to Mary (v. 26), and then Mary spent about three months there before returning home (v. 56). When Mary first arrived at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, an amazing thing happened. John the Baptist, still in Elizabeth's womb, leaped for joy at the presence of Jesus, still in Mary's womb. Even before either of them was born, John was already beginning to fulfill his role as the one announcing the arrival of the Messiah.

So in light of these wonderful things, Mary reflects on the goodness of God, and she voices this psalm. Some people think that Mary could not be the source of this hymn because she would have been a young, uneducated, probably illiterate, country girl. But the Old Testament psalms were so much a part of the community, and Mary would have been very familiar with the OT, including Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 1, that this would have been a natural overflow of what was going on in her heart. It was inspired by the Holy Spirit. And she remembered it the rest of her life. Decades later, when Luke was interviewing her, she was able to recite this for him so that he could record it here.

She begins her song with two lines of praise that are parallel to one another. This is a common feature of psalms—parallelism. The second line repeats the point of the first line, but with different language. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

When she speaks of magnifying the Lord, this doesn't mean that we make God bigger or better than He already is. There's no way to improve on God. Instead, it's to magnify Him in our hearts and minds. It's to see Him as He is. John Piper uses

the illustration of a microscope and a telescope. We magnify God, not like a microscope, which makes something very small look bigger. That's impossible with God. He is not small. He is very big. And there's no way to make Him any bigger than He already is. For us to magnify God is to magnify Him like a telescope, which takes something that is very big (like a star) and helps us to see it more closely.

The Greek word is *megalynō*. And you can hear in the first part of that word—mega—that this is about making something big, to make large, to expand. The bigness of God has filled up Mary's heart in such an overwhelming way that she is exploding with praise. She magnifies the Lord. She makes Him big in her affections. She extols His greatness.

And then she uses another word that helps us to understand another important aspect of worship. In the second line she says, "and my soul rejoices in God my Savior." Magnify . . . rejoice.

An essential aspect of true worship is delighting in the Lord, rejoicing in the Lord. This is how Mary is such a wonderful example for us in thinking about worship. Worship is not apathetic. It is not mechanical. It is not routine. It is not a mere duty to be checked off a list. It is not a chore. It is not dull. It is not boring.

You may have all kinds of bad connotations of worship. You may think of long worship services that drag on and bore you to death. And then if you're told that heaven is going to be like an everlasting worship service, you might feel like you'd rather not be there for that.

That's why Mary's song is so instructive for us. This is a taste of the kind of joyful praise we will experience in heaven forever. It will be anything but boring or dull. It will be the most intense excitement and joy we've ever experienced, and it will go on forever. We will be in His presence. We will see Him for who He is. We will be unhindered by our sinful flesh and worldly distractions.

And even now, this is what we should long for and seek to foster in our lives. We need to fight to see God for who He is and rejoice in Him, find our hope in Him, find our ultimate and lasting delight in Him. Can you hear the enthusiasm in Mary's song? I'm not sure what kinds of tunes she would have used when she sang this, but I don't think it would have sounded like a dirge. It wouldn't have been slow and sad. I can picture her preparing meals, washing clothes, changing diapers, and as she goes about her daily work she sings. And I imagine that very often she would sing these words. And it would put a bounce in her step. It would lift her spirits. It would give her perspective on the difficulties of everyday life. As she sang and praised the Lord, it would

rejuvenate her. It gave her great joy to remember all that the Lord had done and all that the Lord was doing.

Donald Whitney, in his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, says that “if worship wearies you, you aren’t really worshipping.”¹ That’s a good test for us. If Bible reading and prayer and fellowship with other believers and corporate worship feels like a burden, if it always seems depleting, then there’s something seriously wrong. That’s not real worship. That’s legalism or hypocrisy or something, but it’s not true worship. It’s certainly not what we see in Mary’s song. When we’re involved in true worship, it will not be a burden but a delight. It will not be depleting but life-giving. It will not be depressing, but uplifting.

The Object of Mary’s Worship

The next point, which is just a very simple observation, is that the object of Mary’s worship is God. She is praising God for who He is and what He is doing. And we’ll talk in more detail in just a moment about the specific things she is praising Him for. But as a point of application let’s observe that the thing that causes such joy in Mary’s heart is God, Himself. It is God who causes her spirit to rejoice.

What I want you to realize this morning is that everyone has a song in their heart. Everyone has a song of praise that characterizes their life. It’s simply a matter of what that object is that’s being praised.

What would be the song of praise on the lips of most Americans? If we’re honest with ourselves, what is the song of praise that consumes our thoughts and our schedules and our checkbooks? We may not say it quite like this, but might our lives reflect a song that goes something like this:

My soul magnifies money, and my spirit rejoices in my opportunities to get rich.

My soul magnifies self, and my spirit rejoices in the fact that people think highly of me.

My soul magnifies achievement, and my spirit rejoices in what I’ve accomplished by my hard work.

My soul magnifies sensual pleasures, and my spirit rejoices in pornography and promiscuity and sexual immorality.

My soul magnifies possessions, and my spirit rejoices in the many beautiful things I’ve accumulated for myself.

Or, in the spirit of the season: My soul magnifies Christmas presents, and my spirit rejoices in what I’m hoping to receive.

What is the song in your heart this morning? What is the song of your life? You might not verbalize it. You might not put into words quite like this. But every one of us has a song of

¹ Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, page 90.

worship that is evident in the things we're most passionate about. The question is, what are you worshipping? What is the object of your worship?

I challenge you to examine your heart today and examine Mary's song, and pray that the desires and delights of your heart would match the desires and delights expressed in this song.

The Content of Mary's Worship

Finally, let's look at some of the attributes and actions of God for which Mary praises Him. This is the content of her worship. It is not an ambiguous worship. It is very definite and specific. And this is how our worship should be. We don't stop with the words "my soul magnifies the Lord." We also voice reasons for why we magnify Him, why we rejoice in Him. This is what Mary does. Notice that three times in verses 48-49 she uses the word "for." She is giving a basis for her statement in verses 46-47.

Even before those statements of explanation, though, we should notice that she refers to the Lord in verse 47 as "God my Savior." Mary rejoices in God because He has saved her. Mary acknowledges her need for a Savior. She acknowledges her sin and recognizes in herself and in the world around her that things are not as they should be. We need a Savior, and Mary exalts the Lord as the One who saves.

This is another essential aspect of true worship. We don't delight in God just because He helps us out in different ways—because He helps us in our marriage or family or finances or business or whatever. It's far deeper than that. We delight in Him and praise Him and worship Him because He has saved us from the eternal punishment we deserve for our sins. God has worked in history, in sending His own Son to live and die for us, and this work of redemption reverses the curse of sin. Everything that is wrong with the world because of sin will be made right again because of what Christ accomplished. And everyone who looks to Him in reverence and humility and faith will be saved.

Mary rejoices in "God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant." That's the attitude of a true worshipper—standing in awe of God's goodness to me, someone who does not deserve His goodness. And Mary marvels at the wonderful things that are happening, which she has the unique privilege of being a part of. She says in the second part of verse 48, "For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed." And lest you think that Mary is on an ego trip here, this is not about her drawing attention to herself. It's about drawing attention to God. She knows that this story will be told down through the generations, and therefore each generation will know of the

blessings that God graciously bestowed upon this humble and lowly servant.

In verse 48 she explains and gives a basis for why all generations will recognize her to be blessed by God. They will call her blessed because “he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” She’s saying, it’s not because of me that they’ll call me blessed. It’s not because of anything I did. But it’s because of what the mighty One has done. It’s because of what the holy One has done. God is powerful to cause a virgin to conceive. He is powerful to send His own eternal Son into the world to live and die and rise again. He is powerful to overcome evil. And He is holy. He is set apart, transcendent, perfect and righteous. This is the great God who chose to bless Mary, and the testimony of this unique blessing continues to be told to each generation.

In verse 50 Mary sings of something else that is evident in each generation, and that is God’s mercy. God shows mercy to those who fear Him, those who revere Him, those who honor Him and seek to obey Him. God is great and powerful and holy, and we need to acknowledge Him as such. We stand in awe of Him and in reverent fear of Him. Not the kind of fear that makes us want to run away from Him, but rather it’s the fear of running away from Him. It’s the fear of what would happen to us if we rejected Him and turned our backs on Him. And so those who fear Him draw near to Him and bask in His glory and experience His mercy.

In verses 51-53 Mary sings of the great reversal that happens in the Kingdom of God. The statement in verse 50 about “those who fear him” gives us the context for these groups of people. There are those who are high and mighty in the world’s estimation, those who are self-sufficient, independent, not fearing God and living under the assumption that they don’t need God. This is who Mary refers to as the proud (v. 51), the mighty (v. 52), the rich (v. 53). In contrast are those who do fear the Lord, and they are not esteemed in the world’s eyes. They are those of humble estate (v. 52), who are hungry (v. 53).

And here’s the amazing thing about God’s kingdom, the thing that Mary sings about and rejoices in. The coming of the kingdom of God means that the high and mighty in the world are going to be brought down, and the lowly and humble who fear the Lord are going to be exalted. Everything is going to be turned around. Everything is going to be made right. The proud and mighty and rich who think so highly of themselves and think they have everything they could ever need or want, they are going to be brought down. They are going to be sent away empty. But the humble will be exalted, and the hungry will be filled with good things.

You might be wondering what this means for you. Does this mean that anyone who is rich is going to hell? Does it mean that only the poor will be saved? And what constitutes rich and poor? What does this mean practically?

There's something Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that I think gets to the heart of this matter. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." This is an insightful verse, and it's very helpful to first ask the question: what does it look like to serve money? It doesn't mean that you do good works on behalf of the US currency. A \$100 bill has no needs. So, serving money cannot refer to somehow meeting the needs of money. No, you serve money by putting your hope in money to satisfy the deepest longings of your heart. You position yourself to be satisfied in the things that money can buy. That's how a person serves money. Hoping in money. Delighting in money and the things money can buy. Seeking satisfaction in money.

Likewise, you serve God by putting your hope in Him to satisfy the deepest longings of your heart—by putting yourself in the place to benefit from His beauty and greatness. This is what Mary's doing in her song. To serve God is to hope in Him, to delight in Him, to seek your satisfaction in Him. Serving God does not mean you do good works to meet God's needs. God has no needs. You serve Him by hoping in Him and asking *Him* to meet *your* needs. This is what it means to be a Christian. Christians are not people who serve God by working for Him in order to meet His needs and hopefully earn some reward from Him. That's not biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity is serving God by going to Him for satisfaction and delight. Going to Him to meet all your needs. Running to Him because you see that He is the only source of eternal pleasure.

This is why we cannot serve both God and money. We will ultimately put our hope in one or the other. In the end, our lives will reveal either that we were hoping in money, or that we were hoping in God. It's not so much a matter of how much money you have. It's a matter of your heart. It's a matter of what you're passionate about, what you're hoping in, what you're delighting in. And the reality that Mary is singing about is that God will one day make that judgment, and He will condemn those who have not feared Him, those who have put their hope in other things. But He will greatly reward those who have put their hope in Him and have not idolized money or fame or power or prestige.

Mary closes her hymn by tying this in with the promises God has made to His people. God has shown steadfast love to His covenant people. Mary traces it all the way back to Abraham.

God said in Genesis 12, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3) And Mary, overcome with joy and praise, is saying, “It’s here!! The time has come. The fulfillment of all the promises is happening.”

This past Tuesday I was driving over to the Reformed Presbyterian seminary for a meeting, and when I was waiting at a stop light I noticed the license plate of the car in front of me. It read, “THNKFL.” And at the same time I was noticing the kind of car that this license plate was attached to. It was a very nice car. It was a BMW sports car, looked brand new. And I thought, “Well, I’m glad they’re thankful for their nice car and for whatever other nice things they’ve been able to buy.” And then a few minutes later I was at another stop light, and I found myself behind a very old GMC conversion van. It had seen better days. It was rusty. The bumper was dented and hanging down a bit. And I thought, “If *that* license plate read ‘THNKFL’ it would pretty much be a perfect picture of Mary’s song.” It made me think of Mary and Joseph heading to Bethlehem, without the help of even an old, rusty conversion van. And then arriving there and having no place to stay except a smelly stable, and then placing baby Jesus in the animals’ feeding trough. But make no mistake, they were thankful. They were praising and worshipping God. Their hope was not in the material possessions of this world. Their hope was in a Person, a very special Person. Their hope was in the baby they held in their arms—Jesus, the One who will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).