

Sunday, December 5, 2021 | Great Joy

Week 1 | Luke 1:39-56 | “Mary’s Song.”

Announcements:

- Teen Girls Paint Night Sat., Dec 18th @ 4PM.
 - Christmas eve, Communion, Carols, and Candlelight, @ 6PM.
 - Sign up to help volunteer at Samaritan Purse. See Bob Libby.
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Today we'll start a new four-week series called Great Joy. This study looks at the Christmas story from the songs sung in the Gospels before, during, and after Christ's birth. As we dive deep into these passages, we'll discover that at the heart of each song lies a hope that the Messiah we'll change the world. And, with any luck, these messages will warm your heart, stir your soul, and challenge you to worship the true Joy-Bringer.

To start, we'll be listening to the mother of Jesus, Mary, as she sings her song. Traditionally, this song has been referred to as the *Magnificat* after the Latin translation of the Greek word *meg-al-oo'-no*, translated as "glories" here in our text. The Greek verb *meg-al-oo'-no* is a term that expresses praise and adoration. But, quite literally, this word means to make something bigger hence why it is often translated as "magnify."¹

What's the purpose of a magnifying glass? Isn't it to make something larger, take a closer look, or make something great? When we worship Christ, we are placing a proverbial magnifying glass over him so we can see and exalt the wonder of his complexity and goodness—making his name great because he is great. Colloquially, this is what we mean when we say that we are “to make much of Christ.” We are showing others how great he is. And this is precisely what Mary is doing in her song of praise. Elizabeth praises Mary because Mary is carrying the Lord, but Mary gives all the attention back to Christ.

EXAMPLE: <INSERT PICTURE> The effect that Mary’s song has on us is similar to the one found in the classic, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. In that movie, Charlie Brown gets frustrated with the commercialization of the Christmas season. He struggles with what the true meaning of the season is; until he is finally reminded that it’s about Christ. It’s not about the stuff, as lovely as stuff can be, and it’s not even about the traditions, as

¹ Walter Grundmann, s.v. “Μεγαλύνω,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], p. 543.

fun as that can be. All those things are well and good, but they're meaningless compared to the real reason of Christmas—the person of Jesus. Like Mary before him, Charlie Brown reminds us that we are to make God big—to magnify Him--and not us. It is not about the gifts under a Christmas tree but about the Son of God who hung on a tree.

READ: Luke 1:39-56 (ESV)

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

⁴⁶ And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Now, I want you to notice that Mary's song is comprised of three distinct verses. The first verse revolves around...

i. How God has acted on her behalf (vs. 46-49).

Mary says that her "soul glorifies the Lord," and her "spirit rejoices." But what is the cause of such joy?

a. Mary recognizes that God is her "Savior" (vs. 47).

Sadly, some denominations put far too much emphasis on Mary. Catholics, for instance, even go so far as to put her on equal footing with Jesus in what they called the "Veneration of Mary." If Mary were alive today, I do not doubt that she would be appalled by such attention. She knew that she was as much in need of Savior as anyone else.

b. Mary recognizes that God has been "mindful" of her low estate (vs. 48).

The Greek word used for "mindful" is *epiblépō* which carries the idea of someone looking with regard or concern on someone's hardship (cf. Lu. 9:38). Far from Mary thinking of herself as deserving of God's favor, she sees herself as nothing more than a "servant." Yet, she realized that God was willing to use a lowly serving girl to bring His Son into the world, and through this act of extravagant grace, Mary knew she would be called "blessed." In fact, Elizabeth was among the first to call her that (vs. 42-45).

Today, a popular Christmas song called "Mary Did You Know," poses different questions to Mary. In doing so, the music reviews the amazing things Jesus did while on earth (i.e., healing blindness, calming storms, raising the dead, etc.). And while if Mary were to answer those questions, she'd have to say "no," she was not totally clueless as to the importance of this moment. She knew that for generations after her, she would be remembered as the one who brought the Son of God into the world.

c. Mary recognizes that God, the Mighty One, has done "great things" for her (vs. 49).

What are the "great things" that she is referring to? I think it's safe to say her virgin conception. Interestingly, though, she uses the title "Mighty One" when she references God. This moniker usually describes God as the one who is triumphant in battle (cf. Ps. 24:7-10; Isa. 42:13; Zeph. 3:17).² Thus, for Mary to invoke a name of God that is laden with the implication of warfare, she is recognizing that through the child in her belly, God will deliver her and her people from their

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Green, Joel B., *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997], p. 102.

enemies. Glance through the OT, and you will realize that the Mighty God has a habit of delivering his people through remarkable means (cf. the Exodus).

However, there is no place that that principle is better seen than in how God sent his Son to be born and raised by the hand of a serving girl. It wasn't on some battlefield that man was saved but through a manger in Bethlehem.

The second verse revolves around...

ii. How God has acted for everyone else (vs. 50-53).

Mary now moves the focus of her song away from herself and draws our attention to how God's "mercy" has worked from "generation to generation" (vs. 50). And she calls these the "mighty deeds" of God's "arm." In fact, Mary points out five things that God has done:

- a. He has "scattered" the prideful (vs. 51).
- b. He has "brought down" the rulers (vs. 52).
- c. He has "lifted up" the humble (vs. 52).
- d. He has "filled" the hungry (vs. 53).
- e. He has "sent away" the rich "empty" (vs. 53).

Now, while we can undoubtedly go into each one of these and glean a nuanced understanding of what Mary was saying, essentially, the through-line that unites these five principles is how God is the God of reversals. Rather than the prideful and rulers being lifted up, the humble are exalted. In fact, the prideful are sown to the wind, and the rulers are leveled to the ground. Rather than the rich who are filled, the hungry are satisfied. And far from being filled, Mary says the rich are expelled from the presence of God, leaving them barren and deflated.

Interestingly, this section is particularly reminiscent of what Jesus will say when he's preaching the famous Sermon on the Mount five chapters later in Luke 6. There, the Messiah will say things like "blessed are the poor," "blessed are the hungry," and "blessed are those who mourn." In doing so, the Lord highlights how the characteristics of his kingdom are utterly unlike anything we've experienced here on earth. What's remarkable then is that Mary, at some level, understood long before anyone else that the kingdom God was bringing to bear in our world was one that was completely upside down. It subverts every earthly standard.

And the last verse revolves around...

iii. How God has acted throughout all generations (vs. 54-55).

Mary now moves away from how God has generally acted with the human race to how he has worked, specifically, with her kinsmen. She says, "He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.” In doing so, she makes two points that are worth noting.

a. The hope that grows within her is, first and foremost, the hope of Israel.

Before Jesus ever came to the world, he first came to the Jews. Because of God's everlasting *khesed*, the children of Abraham have been blessed throughout all generations. God has loved the Jewish people unconditionally. And Mary knows that the Messiah growing inside her is the one that was foretold long ago.

b. Ultimately, the hope that grows within her is the hope of all.

Yet, while God is still at work in the Jewish world, his saving work is to all who come to Jesus. When God first made a covenant with Abraham, he told him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand by the sea. But God doesn't stop there. He not only tells Abraham that he will have a large family, but he also says, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (cf. Gen. 12:3).

Essentially, Mary's song points out that Christmas is as much a **Jewish** holiday as it is a **Christian** one. This is why one of the greatest embarrassments of the past 2,000 years is how Hebrews, by and large, have willingly ignored this Hebrew girl's psalm. After all, Mary's psalm is worthy of inclusion in the Book of Psalms itself alongside the likes of Psalm 23. The poetic notes she hits are the same ones the great warrior-poet himself, King David, hits.

What's more, as you've no doubt noticed by now, her ballad about magnifying God is rife with allusions and quotations that are taken directly from the Old Testament. In fact, the allusions and quotations in this song could be their own study:³

- Luke 1:46-55 and 1 Sam. 2:1-10
- Luke 1:49 and Psalm 111:9
- Luke 1:50 and Psalm 103:13, 17
- Luke 1:51 and 2 Samuel 22:28; Psalm 89:10
- Luke 1:52 and Job 12:19; Job 5:11
- Luke 1:53 and Psalm 107:9; 1 Samuel 2:5

³ Jones, David A, *Old Testament Quotations and Allusions in the New Testament*, [Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009].

- Luke 1:54 and Psalm 98:3; Isaiah 41:8
- Luke 1:55 and Genesis 17:7; 22:17; Micah 7:20

There are so many references to the OT that some theologians have doubted whether a simple country girl like Mary would've had the knowledge to write something as good as her song here. However, it should be noted that just because some may not have some formal training doesn't mean they are devoid of understanding. In fact, time and time again, we're told that God chooses the simple to confound the wise and the weak things to confound the strong (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27). Thus, we have an OT psalm in an NT context.

SO, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Mary's song established continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

By her own admission, Mary may have only been a lowly serving girl. But even she knows the importance of this moment. And while she is not the center of attention (Jesus is), Mary is as close to the center as any other human being. Mary's song is an admission that she sees all the OT promises fulfilled in her baby boy. In fact, she will literally hold that Promise in her arms and be the very first to hear that Promise's voice. Before anyone else, she will gaze into the eyes of that Promise and watch as he grows into a man. She will witness as crowds flock like sheep just to hear her baby boy preach. And, yes, sadly, she will also watch as her own countrymen murder her boy on a Roman cross. Yet she will also be among the first to witness her Son rise from the grave.

Mary, in the beginning, may not have known the details of Jesus' story, but she knew something had changed. Yet, while she knew things were changing, they also completed a story that began as far back as Gen 3. And this realization filled her with joy.

In fact, this is the exact point that John the Beloved makes.

READ: 1 John 1:1-4 (ESV)

¹That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ²the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. ⁴And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

John's point is that the Gospels were eyewitness accounts. Thousands were firsthand observers of Jesus' work. And it is because of them that we celebrate Christmas today. But who do you think first told of the Christmas story? Not the disciples. They weren't there. It was Mary. She was the one person who was actually present when it happened. And here, in Luke 1, her message to all, to those throughout every generation, is this: the Messiah who was prophesied of old is Jesus, my Son. Thus, Mary's song establishes continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

Video Description

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TEXT: Luke 1:39-56

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Pastor’s manuscript can be found here: