

Magnifying the Lord

Please open your Bible to the book of Luke and chapter 1, or turn to page _____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you. We're looking at Mary's song this morning.

I love music and musicals and all of that, especially around the holidays. If you've ever seen a musical or an opera, then you've seen how there are times when the story stops, and the characters break out into song. Have you ever wondered – why do they do that? That's not normal. So what's the purpose of that breaking out in song?

Well, part of the purpose is that these songs are meant to make us join in and interpret the events as the audience along with the people in the story. It's as though we get to pause and understand what the characters are thinking and feeling about what's happening. And music helps convey emotion and tone. It amplifies what we're supposed to be feeling as the audience.

And we also find this kind of thing happening in several places in the Bible.

- After the exodus – Moses and Miriam sing (exodus 15)
- Deborah after the people are delivered (Judges 5)
- Hannah, after she conceives (1 Samuel 2)

And here in Luke's gospel, we see this sort of thing happening again and again – with Mary here, later in chapter 1 with Zechariah, and then the angels in chapter 2, and finally Simeon in the temple. Four times, Luke stops the story in order to express a song or word of prophesy from the characters. You don't have to have these songs in order to move the narrative forward. But Luke includes them in order to show us how these events should be interpreted. And even more specifically, how they should cause us to rejoice and celebrate and worship God as a result.

So we'll be looking at the song of Mary this morning, also known as Mary's Magnificat, so called because of the Latin word for magnify that Mary uses to begin her song. And it's a song that helps us see and interpret the events that are happening – the virgin conception, the conception of John the Baptist by Elizabeth, and the coming of the Messiah to bring transformation and reversal to this world. So let's read our text this morning...Read **Luke 1:39-56**

Intro

There are some great stories in history of dramatic reversals. One of them supposedly happened in 1781 at the Battle of Yorktown during the American Revolution. That was the last decisive battle of the war, and it showed the world that the unthinkable had happened – a ragtag group of colonies in the New World had defeated the great British Empire. It was not what anyone had expected. And supposedly, after their defeat, as the remaining British soldiers left town, they played the song, “The World Turned Upside Down,” now made famous through the Broadway Musical *Hamilton*.

The world seemed to have been turned upside down because the strong were defeated and the weak won. People’s expectations were wrong – things turned out much differently than they thought they would. I imagine many people, maybe even most of the colonists themselves, didn’t think they were going to win when the war started. It was a dramatic reversal.

We have expectations in this life as well, don’t we? We have assumptions about how the world really works. And sometimes, we can slip into cynicism – a sort of pessimistic belief that things are on a downward trend. So we may have expectations that things will always be getting worse...

We expect that our problems will never go away.

We expect that our health will always decline.

We expect that the rich will get richer and the poor will always be poor.

Our attitude can become more like Scrooge, saying “Bah humbug!” and less like Tiny Tim – “God bless us, every one!”

And our passage this morning pushes back against this kind of cynicism. It speaks of a great reversal that God is doing. And so it challenges our unbelief and presses us to rejoice as we hear once again about these events that we celebrate at Christmastime.

So what I want to do this morning is simply walk through this passage, looking first at the context of Mary’s Song and then we’ll spend most of our time on its content – the heart of her worship. And along the way, we’ll see what I believe is the main point of this section – that Jesus brings judgment on the proud but joy to the humble.

And I want to just say that if you're visiting with us this morning, and you're not a Christian, then this is a great text for you to consider. Luke has written his book of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection in order to provide an orderly account of who Jesus is and why He came. So this passage is written with you in mind, so that you might consider what has been recorded here and what you will do with Jesus.

And let me also say, if you're a teenager in the room, then this text is especially significant for you because Mary is a teenager. You know, you can follow Jesus and be bold for Him and know your Bible well, even at your age. So if you're looking for a role model, then consider Mary here. Teenagers tend to ask the same kinds of questions that all of us ask, things like "Does anyone care about me? Does anyone see me? Will anything satisfy me?" Mary answers all of those in this one song. She knows that God sees her and cares for her. She has found already in her life that God is the source of her joy and satisfaction. She worships God in His majesty and holiness as a teenager.

Or maybe you'd say, what about me? I'm a 'classic senior,' as we say around here. Well, there's someone here for you too – her name is Elizabeth. Luke has already told us that Elizabeth is 'advanced in years.' And so she's this classic senior, and God has visited her and blessed her with a child through her husband Zechariah when they had previously been unable to have children. And now Mary will visit her, and Elizabeth will have a great ministry of encouragement to her. So she's a good role model for us as well.

So there's something for everyone this morning.

The Context

Let's start first, then, with the context of Mary's song. Look at verses 39-40

Luke 1:39-40

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, **40** and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Luke tells us that Mary went with haste through the hill country to make this trip. Scholars estimate that this may have been a trip of 75-100 miles. That's quite a journey for a teenage girl to make. And verse 56 tells us that she was there about three months.

And then we get this beautiful little scene, this conversation between these two women, a classic senior and a teenager, two women whom God has met in His grace.

And they are talking about something miraculous that has happened, unlike anything that has happened in the history of the world. And here it is, recorded for us to read about today. And so they get to talk and rejoice together. They're both elated to be recipients of God's favor. This is the mother of John the Baptist, the forerunner, and the mother of Jesus the Messiah interacting together.

And it's actually more than just the two moms interacting. Look at verse 41...

Luke 1:41

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.

The baby, John the Baptist, is already excited about the coming of Jesus. The baby leaps in her womb. This baby is alive and rejoicing at the coming of the Messiah. And that's what John will do in his life – rejoice in Jesus and point people to Him.

And this is not the point of this text, but notice that this baby is full of emotions and able to recognize Jesus, even before birth. The Bible is consistent in its recognition that life begins at conception and is valuable in God's eyes.

So little John rejoices, and Elizabeth proclaims her joy as well...

Luke 41:41-42

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, **42** and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!

So this classic senior is happy – exclaiming with a loud cry – "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" The word 'blessed' here refers to God's favor being on Mary and her child. God has blessed her, not because she is worthy in herself or somehow sinless or perfect in any way, but because God has given her the grace to carry the Son of God.

Later in verse 45, Elizabeth says...

Luke 1:45

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

So Mary is blessed because she's been given this grace from God to carry Jesus. And now, a different word for blessed is used – this is the one that we've seen before in the Beattitudes of Jesus. 'Flourishing' is she who believed that what God said would happen. This is a statement recognizing the faith of Mary. Mary believed God. Remember what she said, "I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

So while Mary is not perfect, she is a role model for us. She believed God. She had faith in what seemed impossible to her. And as we'll see in her song in just a moment she wants to put all the focus on God. And this kind of faith is the path to a flourishing, blessed life.

So we see that Elizabeth is excited for her relative Mary. There's no jealousy here. In fact, there's humility – look at verse 43...

Luke 1:43

And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

Elizabeth is grateful to God and in wonder of His mercy. Who am I that I would get to visit with you as you carry the Lord? There's a humility in her response to this blessing from God.

And that's the spirit of Luke 1 – humility, awe, wonder, joy. Why? Because that's what grace does to us. When we recognize what we have received and the blessings that God has given, this is what it does to us. It makes us stand in awe. It makes us humble. It makes us happy. Is grace having that effect in your life?

So this is the context of Mary's song. The news has come to both of these women, and they respond with joy and awe and humility. Secondly, then, let's look at the content of Mary's song...

The Content

Listen to what one scholar says about these verses...

"It's the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus—Jesus who's only just been conceived, not yet born, but who has made Mary giddy with excitement and hope and triumph. In many cultures today, it's the women who really

know how to celebrate, to sing and dance, with their bodies and voices saying things far deeper than words. That's how Mary's song comes across here."¹

Indeed, that's how Mary's song comes across here. So when we read how the gospel of Luke opens, how the New Testament's account of the coming of Jesus begins, we should see that the response is one of exuberant excitement and joy and even singing.

And that's what Christmas is all about. It's glad tidings of great joy for all the people! This is the true spirit of Christmas. It's the worship of Jesus.

So when people ask, "Are you in the Christmas spirit?" I know they're probably talking about the joys of family and giving and traditions and all of that – and all of that is good and wonderful. But this right here is the reason underneath all of that. It's about joy to the world because the Lord has come.

So don't try to capture the wonder of Christmas without Jesus. It'd be like trying to have a birthday party without the birthday boy present. Christmas is all about the glory of Christ. And because He is so glorious, then we happily enjoy celebrating the wonderful gifts He gives us to enjoy.

And that's what we see in Mary's song of worship here. It's all about the true spirit of Christmas. It's about the worship of the God behind all the good gifts He gives us as His children. So let's look at how Mary worships God and see what we can learn.

Notice, first how Mary begins this song...

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

Joyful

The first thing we see is that Mary's worship comes from the joy in her own soul. Her soul and her spirit are set in parallel here – she's not talking about different parts of her

¹ N.T. Wright, Luke for Everyone, 14

being. They're set in parallel here. She's saying my whole being, beginning with my inner person magnifies and rejoices in the Lord God, my Savior.

Question – what would it take for your soul to celebrate this way? What kind of news would you need to hear for this to be your response?

Maybe if someone told you - you don't have any debt anymore. Or the cancer is gone. Or your loved one is no longer sick or in pain. What kind of good news would make you rejoice like this?

That's what good news does, right? It makes us rejoice? Our joy is made complete when we share it with others, so we want to invite others in to our rejoicing. Now, I don't say this to make us all feel guilty today. But the good news of the gospel should make our souls rejoice. Mary's soul here magnifies God.

There are echoes here of the Psalms.

Psalm 108:1

My heart is steadfast, O God!

I will sing and make melody with all my being!

Psalm 103:1

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!

And Mary expresses this whole-hearted rejoicing through song. Paul says in Ephesians that we sing and make melody to the Lord with your heart. That's encouraging for those of us who can't sing as well as we'd like – we can make melody with our hearts. Mary's worship is whole-hearted.

And notice that it's also personal. I rejoice in God, *my* Savior. She's giving praise to God **because** she knows Him to be the One who rescued her, delivered her, saved her. Look at verses 48-49...

Luke 1:48-49

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.

Mary recognizes that the Lord has blessed her in her humble estate. She's not wealthy. She doesn't have credentials or special skills to commend her to God. But now she will be called blessed throughout history because of God's kindness to her. She says, "He who is mighty has done great things for me." She's recognizing and appreciating the mercy of God in her own life.

And this is why she said in verse one, her soul magnifies the Lord. That's what she's doing. She's magnifying the Lord.

What does it mean to magnify the Lord?

Pastor John Piper talks about how there's a difference between the way a magnifying glass works and the way a telescope works. A magnifying glass makes small things appear bigger. They're not actually big, but they just seem to be. But a telescope, on the other hand, takes these huge things – planets and stars, and makes them visible to us by bringing them close. These planets and stars are enormous, the telescope only lets us see them as though they were a bit closer.

So here - to magnify the Lord is like a telescope, not a magnifying glass. The Lord is All-mighty, holy, and majestic in His glory. And Mary is saying, my soul is worshipping God by bringing Him close. It's not that He appears bigger than He is. No, I am now recognizing and appreciating more of who God is in all of His glory as I consider Him and worship Him. My soul magnifies the Lord!

And then notice that this personal, whole-hearted joy is set in parallel with her soul magnifying the Lord. These things go together – our joy and our worship of God. By the grace of God, these things always go together. Our happiness and giving glory to God go hand in hand. Again, John Piper has argued in that one of the central claims of the Bible is that:

God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.

Or the Westminster Confession states, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

And that means that when you minimize God, you are minimizing your own joy. And when you maximize God, you maximize joy. Most people don't believe that. They think, "If I can just minimize God in my life, and have little to do with God, then I'll be able to enjoy myself. But the more God I get, the more that's going to get in the way of my joy."

But it doesn't work that way. Some of the best news is that your quest to find happiness and God's command to glorify and worship Him are not at odds with each other. The way to happiness is to glorify God. The way to glorify God is to pursue your joy in Him. They go together.

And so make much of God! And when you do that, you will find joy in Him. That's what we see with Mary's song here. She's found this to be true. Her soul magnifies the Lord and rejoices in her Savior.

Biblical

Another lesson that we can draw from the content of Mary's song here is how saturated it is with the Scriptures. Her worship is profoundly biblical. We've already mentioned a few of the connections in just the first couple verses (Psalm 105, 103), but there are many more throughout her song. There are echoes of Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Micah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. There's also Psalm 113 – God lifts up the poor and gives the barren woman a home. I'm not going to go through all the rest of them now, but there are a lot of them.

The most clear allusion that Mary makes here in her song is to the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Their stories are similar in that they were both recipients of divine grace through an unlikely pregnancy. Hannah had been barren, but when she becomes pregnant and gives birth to Samuel, she bursts forth in praise.

And all of this is remarkable because remember – Mary is just a teenager here. But she is well-versed in her Bible. Even as a young person, she has immersed herself in the Bible, and young people – you should do the same.

And don't let anyone look down on you because of your youth. You can know the Bible and you can know the God of the Bible. If you can order at Starbucks or figure out technology or study chemistry in school, then you can learn the Scriptures.

So young people, don't spend all of your free time becoming an expert at video games or sports or fashion or movies or whatever and then say that you don't have enough time to know your Bible.

And I know that I've been addressing the young people, but this is really a lesson for all of us, isn't it? Paul says that as the word of Christ dwells in us richly, then we sing and instruct one another in song. That's because worship is a response to God's revelation of Himself. The more we see of Him, the more we respond in worship. So if you're having trouble getting your heart into worship as we gather, maybe you need to spend more time swimming in the waters of the Bible.

Mary has been immersed in the Bible, and so when her heart is full from experiencing the grace of God, she has the language of Scripture inside of her and that's what comes out.

So Mary has been worshipping God with her whole heart, with the language of the Bible, and then third notice how God-centered her song is. It's all about Him.

God-Centered

She sings about who God is, what He has done, and what He will do. Or we might summarize it by saying she praises God for His attributes and His actions. Who He is and what He has done.

And I think there's another lesson here because one of the ways that we fight against our worries and anxieties is by putting our focus on who the Lord is and what He has done. I would suggest that Mary has a lot that could cause her worry and anxiety in this moment, wouldn't you agree?

But her focus is not inward. She's not crushed. We don't find her anxious. What do we find her doing? Worshipping! Her gaze is away from herself and on the greatness of God. Worship cuts out the feet from under our worries. She has set her mind things above – on the attributes and actions of God.

So what does she say? We've seen already that Mary recognizes the might of God. He who is mighty has done great things. She continues in...

Luke 1:50-52

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;

So we see that there is a contrast between God's might and the mighty of the earth.
And it's not really a contest. The Lord has brought down the mighty of the earth,
because He is all mighty.

I love the words of the prophet Zephaniah in chapter three. He writes...

Zephaniah 3:17

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.

This is the mighty God who has come to save us. And did you hear that He rejoices over
you with gladness? What a thought for us to consider – that God sings over you! He is
happy to have saved you! He loves you!

And not only is God mighty, Mary says. He is holy. We saw that earlier in verse 49...

Luke 1:49

...and holy is his name.

The name of God refers to His character, His essence. And at the core of God is holiness.
He is wholly distinct and pure and one. He is without any corruption or sin. His nature is
entirely full of integrity and wholeness.

And yet, though He is mighty and powerful and holy – He is at the same time merciful.

Luke 1:50

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

And also...

Luke 1:54-55

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

God is merciful to His people. That’s been true of God in the past, it’s true of Him today, and it will be true on into eternity. God keeps His covenant promises as He did with Abraham. He is full of tenderness and grace, despite our sins and rebellion. He has not treated us as our sins deserve, but has shown mercy and kindness.

What a God He is! So Mary thinks and sings about God’s attributes. And we should do the same! Maybe you’re looking for something to study or some area to grow in this coming year – this is a good one. Read the Bible asking – what does this passage teach me about God? Read a good theology book – they’re not just for pastors or teachers. There are lots of great books that will help you meditate on the nature and attributes of God. Mary has thought about who God is and that has shown up in her worship.

And she also thinks about his actions. And there’s a theme to the actions of God in Mary’s song – it’s that God lifts the humble and humbles the proud. That’s why she says, “He who is mighty has done great things for me.”

This is the message of Christmas. It’s not good advice on how to improve your life a little bit. It’s good news about what God has done in His grace. He has done great things for us.

And not just for her, Mary says in verse fifty that He’s shown mercy from generation to generation. God is continually showing mercy and doing great things for them.

And not only does God lift up the humble, He also humbles the proud. This will be a theme, by way, as a thread that Luke will emphasize throughout His account of Jesus’s life. From the birth of Jesus in a feeding trough to the ministry to the tax collectors and sinners, Luke wants us to see that God lifts up the humble.

And so the lesson for us is that if we want to be lifted up by God, then the way to do that is humility. It is by humbling yourself before the Lord, serving Him and serving others – that is the path to greatness in God’s eyes.

Augustine, was a great theologian in the early church, wrote in a letter to a friend – you want to know the way to be devoted to and hold fast to the truth of God? What’s the secret?

Augustine –

“This way is first humility, second humility, third humility, and however often you should ask me I would say the same...”²

This is the way of Jesus. And it’s the path that God calls us to follow if we are to follow Him. What is the way? Humility, humility, humility

And how do we know that we’re humble? Verse 53 connects the humble with the hungry. Look there...

Luke 1:53

he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

The humble are the hungry. And they go to God to be satisfied. But the rich – those who are calloused against the way of God and puffed up in their self-reliance – they are sent away empty. Those who don’t think they need God, they are sent away empty like the rich young ruler who had idolized his wealth.

And so the call to us is to be hungry and go to God to be satisfied. And Jesus says, everyone who comes to me will be satisfied. I give living water to the thirsty so that they will never thirst again.

But the world we live in is so unsatisfied, isn’t it? People are discontent everywhere you look. We just need more stuff. We want this or that, then we’ll be happy. I just need to get over this hump at work or just get this thing with school or the house or my kids figured out, and then things will be good.

And this is where this major theme of the Bible that I referenced earlier is so helpful. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. I first read that in John Piper’s book, *Desiring God*. I received that book as a gift, a graduation present from my

² Letters (83-130), ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, vol. 18, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 282.

best friend. But I had actually purchased a copy of that book already, though I hadn't read it – because I was going to give it to my best friend for graduation. So my buddy and I both bought this book for each other, and we both read it as we went our separate ways to college.

And that book and Piper's relentless emphasis on the interconnectedness of God's glory and our joy proved to be a foundational element of my understanding of God and the Bible. And it's been a theme I find myself coming back to over and over, especially in those times when God feels distant or I am struggling with contentment or joy. My heart is restless until it finds its rest in God. To look elsewhere is foolishness.

Let us learn from Mary here that God fills the hungry with good things. And let's be filled. And God fills and satisfies in a deep and lasting way that goes beyond the temporary pleasures of the things of earth.

Have you ever been hungry in a place where there was not going to be any food for a while? I was on a long flight one time, and I hadn't eaten beforehand because airport food is so crazy expensive. And then on the flight, they gave us a little pack of pretzels or nuts or something. And I ate them and was just not satisfied. If anything, it made the hunger worse.

When we try to go somewhere else for satisfaction and joy and contentment, then all we're going to find is an unsatisfying little pack of peanuts.

Brothers and sisters – Christmas can't satisfy you. But Christ can.

God lifts up the humble. But notice also that He humbles the proud. Did you see this great theme of reversal here? God will set things right. He brings justice.

So we saw verse 51 – the proud have been scattered. Verse 52, the mighty in this life will be brought down. And in verse 53, that the rich have been sent away empty. Over and over, all through the biblical storyline we see that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

So the lesson is plain – beware of pride. Do not become arrogant in your thoughts or proud in your actions. Instead, the way of Jesus is humility, humility, humility.

We see the humility of Jesus most clearly in the gospel message – that Jesus would lay down His life and rise again on the third day so that He might deliver His people from their sins. He who is mighty has done great things for me.

I hope you can say that is true for you. Really, I hope that you have come to a point where you have recognized the great things that Jesus has done for you. That you have humbled yourself before the Lord, asking Him to forgive you for your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. And if you've never done that, then there's no better day than today.

The coming of Jesus brings reversal; He brings joy and justice for His people in the midst of sorrow and oppression.

Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon on the Magnificat –

“So then, to conclude, here is something for every child of God to do. You can all magnify the Lord, and you may all rejoice in him. You cannot all preach. If you could, who would there be to hear you? If all were preachers, where would be the hearers? But you can all praise God. If there is any brother or sister here who has only one talent, do not let such a one say, “I cannot do anything.” You can magnify the Lord, and you can rejoice in him. To be happy in him is to praise God.”³

Amen. To be happy in Him is to praise God.

Brothers and sisters, let us worship God. Let us magnify Him together. And let us find our joy in Him this Christmas.

Let's pray together...

³ No. 2941-51:301. A Sermon Delivered On Thursday Evening, April 22, 1875, By C. H. Spurgeon, At The Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington. 11/20/2016*11/20/2016