

Magnify the Lord with Mary

He Has Done Great Things / Luke 1:46-56 / Sunday, December 24, 2023

Introduction:

How do you respond when you think of the great things God has done in Jesus Christ, especially in this Advent Season, as we remember His incarnation? That is the question we will consider this morning as we continue our Advent series, “He Has Done Great Things.” Our passage, in Luke 1:46-56, holds Mary’s response to the proclamation of Elizabeth that we looked at last week. A proclamation, through the Holy Spirit, that declared Mary and her child to be greatly blessed, called the baby in Mary’s womb her Lord, and promised full satisfaction and happiness to Mary because she believed the Lord would fulfill His promises to her. And we find Mary response given as an outburst of praise that is consistent with Psalms of thanksgiving. Look at verses 46-47 with me, “And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’” To magnify the Lord is to exalt and glorify Him, and the tense of this verb in Greek identifies this as a continual and habitual act. Mary continually magnifies the Lord. The second line adds emphasis, showing Her exaltation is rejoicing in God as her Savior. Her song comes from recognizing the focus of what has been proclaimed to her is God’s salvation. The references to soul and spirit are ways of speaking of the whole of her being, not distinct aspects of her person. As Mary soaks in all she has heard, her whole being bursts out in song to glorify and rejoice in God her Savior. The rest of her song focuses on the reasons or grounds for her exaltation with an emphasis on the mercy of God, particularly the mercy He shows to the humble, needy, and oppressed. Consider with me three reasons Mary gives for her praise. First, in verses 48-49, we see that,

Mary Magnifies the Lord for His Mercy Shown to Her

Her praise begins with what God has done for her, and the content and tone of her praise should influence our own. Look at how she relays the first reason in verses 48-49, “for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” First, Mary acknowledges her position before the Lord, understanding how astonishing it is that He was mindful of her. God didn’t look on her because she was powerful, wealthy, or important. He “looked on her humble estate.” This likely refers to her lowly status socially and politically. She wasn’t royalty, or even connected to the priesthood like her relative Elizabeth. She was a lowly virgin who again describes herself as the Lord’s servant, or slave. Mary knew there was nothing owed to her by God, yet He set his gaze on her and blessed her in such a way that from then on, all generations would call her blessed. For generations, she would be spoken of as fortunate, favored, and happy. Then, in verse 49, she ensures the emphasis is not on her merits but on the might and holiness of God. The reason people from all generations will call her blessed is because the one who is mighty has worked for her, one who’s name is Holy. Mary isn’t saying the name of God only is holy, but that God’s very essence is holy. This doesn’t simply mean moral perfection but the fact that God is set apart from everything else in His character, attributes, and works, perfect in who He is and what He does. This holy God is the mighty one who has done great things for her. Mary was of humble estate but the Lord, the holy and mighty one, showed her mercy and did great things for her. And church, we have seen in this series that those great things are all bound to Jesus, the promised child to be born to her. This is why Mary quickly moves to the second reason for her praise found in verses 50-53, where we see that,

Mary Magnifies the Lord for His Mercy Extending to the Humble

Because the great things God has done are bound up in her promised child, Mary’s song of praise rightfully shifts its focus from herself to others. Notice that shift in verse 50, “And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” The mercy God has shown to Mary is available for all who fear him from every generation. Her language is consistent with Psalm 103:17 that says, “But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children.”

God's mercy is part of His steadfast love, and it extends to all who fear him. This is great news because it means that favor and blessing are available to more than just Mary. However, there is an important question for us to answer. What does it mean to fear the Lord? We don't talk about this often in the church, and most of the time the answer is reduced to simply saying, "well this really isn't fear, it is more like reverence for God." This suggests this means we deeply respect God, but I don't think that is consistent with the teaching of Scripture and let me share why. This thought of fearing God is used throughout Luke, and it appears to involve more than just deeply respecting God. Luke's reference to this in Luke 12:4-5 may be the most telling. There Jesus says, "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" It would appear this is more than simply deep respect. Later, towards the end of Luke's gospel, in Luke 23:40-41, one of the criminals on the cross rebukes the other criminal who is mocking Jesus, asking him if he doesn't "fear God" because the condemnation he is under is justly deserved unlike Jesus'. I believe this fear is a real fear of the holiness and power of God, a fear that keeps you from minimizing the Lord's judgement. However, it doesn't leave you scared of His judgment but actually causes you to run to His mercy, because, as we see from verse 50, the one who truly fears the Lord also finds the truth of the mercy He provides. So, it isn't a fear that leads you to be afraid of condemnation but a holy fear that leads you to constantly turn to God your Savior. I once heard someone describe this like seeing an angry bear running towards you, but instead of running from the bear, you run towards it and embrace it with a hug. In that moment you rightfully tremble before the power and anger of the bear, but you trust the embrace of the bear will keep you from experiencing the results of that anger. There is a rightful fear of God's holiness and judgement, like the fear of an angry bear running at you, but that fear understands God's mercy, leading us not to be afraid receiving His wrath but being swept up in a merciful embrace because we know how He responds to those who come humbly to Him for mercy. Notice how Mary goes on to speak of God's judgement and mercy in verses 51-53, "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." There is strength shown through God's arm, which is an image that points back to the ways God delivered the people of Israel from Egypt as He executed judgement against Pharaoh. God does scatter the proud in their haughty thoughts. He brings down supposedly mighty rulers and sends the rich who have no need of Him away with nothing that lasts. But He exalts the humble and fills the hungry with good things. God's mercy always extends to those who recognize their humble estate before Him and their desperate need of His grace and mercy. Consider two Old Testament passages that connect these concepts of fear, humility and seeking refuge in God. Look at how Psalm 31:19 puts fear and seeking refuge together, saying, "Oh, how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of the children of mankind!" Now, notice how Isaiah 66:2 puts humility and fear together, saying "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." God's goodness extends to those who both fear him and take refuge in Him, and He looks on those who are humble and tremble at His word. Our rightful understanding of who God is fears the His holiness and the strength of His arm, His power and authority to kill and cast into hell, and that fear moves us to humbly hide ourselves fully and securely in His mercy, never to be afraid of His condemnation of our sin. This is how the apostle Paul can say "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," in Philippians 2:12 and not contradict how the apostle John tells us "perfect love casts out fear" that "has to do with punishment" in 1 John 4:18. Now, before we move on, notice how Mary speaks of these things as already accomplished. Is she speaking of past acts or future acts? Remember, this is all a response to God's promise of the baby in her womb. So, Mary is speaking in ways that describe God's work through her son as already accomplished.

God's work through Jesus would reveal the judgement of the proud and haughty and the merciful exaltation of the humble, and this was as good as done because her son would fulfill His purpose in coming. He would suffer under the judgement of God for sin on the cross and provide a way to embrace the mercy of God through His resurrection. A proper response to that truth recognizes the just judgement of God towards your sin, rightfully fearing the Lord, but instead of running from God, you see your need of the blood of Jesus to cover your sin and you turn to the mercy God has shown through Jesus Christ. It is only those who recognize their need of mercy, through a rightful fear of God, who will find that very mercy at the cross of Jesus Christ. As Jesus says in Luke 5:32, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Humble yourself before the Lord and He will exalt you through His mercy. Fear the Lord and He will embrace you with His loving arms. There is one more reason that causes Mary's praise, found in verses 54-55, where we see that,

Mary Magnifies the Lord for the Fulfillment of His Promised Mercy to Abraham

The praise of Mary rightfully includes a view towards God's promises to Abraham, reminding us that, in Christ, God has kept His promises. Look at how she concludes in verses 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." Notice again the tense used in Luke's writing, God "has helped his servant Israel." As Mary contemplates the promises connected to the child in her womb, she sees them as the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and the remembrance of His mercy. The reference to Israel as God's servant may point to the servant songs of Isaiah 40-55 which speak of the coming suffering servant sent to redeem His people. A servant who, in Isaiah 53, would be crushed for their iniquities and bring them peace. Who would make an offering for their guilt and make many to be accounted righteous. A servant who, in Isaiah 49, would bring the preserved of Israel back to the Lord and be a light for the nations, spreading the salvation of God to the ends of the earth. The promises given to Abraham came to fruition through the child in Mary's womb, showing the ministry of this child was God's mercy to Abraham and his offspring. This theme of fulfillment is continued in Luke's gospel through the birth narratives as Zechariah, Simeon and Anna all prophesy of it. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was the way in which God was fulfilling His promises to Abraham and his offspring. I want to conclude with two questions to consider as you seek to respond to the truth of God's Word today. First,

1) Will You Come to the Lord in Humility?

The reversal of fortunes for the proud and humble in Mary's song lays the foundation for Luke's emphasis on God's concern and mercy towards those who are outcast and destitute. A concern and mercy, as one commentator notes, that extends throughout the gospel of Luke, and book of Acts, to believing Israel, along with the poor, tax collectors, sinners, Samaritans, and Gentiles (Robert H. Stein, Luke, vol. 24, The New American Commentary, 49-50). When we understand this and see the opposition of the Lord to the proud in verse 51, along with the twice repeated exaltation of those of humble estate in verses 48 and 52, we should recognize the call to come to the Lord in humility. James, the brother of Jesus, says in James 4:6 that, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." God's grace extends in abundance to those who are humble before Him, but He is opposed to the proud. There is no place for pride when we understand the holiness of God and what He has done in Jesus Christ. We could never obtain forgiveness and bring about our own reconciliation with God, because, in our sinful natures, we would only deny His goodness and turn to other things. But God, being rich in mercy, sent His Son into this world, who humbled himself to the point of death on the cross to bring us to God. And as we come to Jesus, humbly, and trust in His saving work, we find forgiveness and a right standing before God. In a great exchange, we receive His righteousness and He receives the just penalty for our sin. If you haven't yet, come in humility to God and ask for His mercy. Yet, our approach of God in humility doesn't only happen at our initial trust in His salvation. No, we should come to God always in humility because everything we receive is by His grace and mercy alone.

James Edwards helpfully sums up this truth from our passage saying, “In most religions a meeting with God requires the low to ascend high, sinners to become saints. [Mary’s Song] reverses all protocol and expectations: God who is high becomes low. He sees human need and initiates a revolution that reorders reality: the transcendent God intercedes on behalf of a lowly young woman and calls her blessed; the Almighty gives mercy to those who fear him and scatters the strong, proud, and rich, while filling the hungry and needy with all good things” (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, ed. D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, 56). Church, come to God in humility and receive His grace and mercy in your every need. The second question to consider is,

2) Do You Rejoice in God’s Mercy Towards You?

Our passage today opened with Mary magnifying the Lord and rejoicing in God her Savior. Everything we have considered from that opening has been reasons Mary saw for bursting out in praise of God. Church, everything she relays are reasons for our hearts to be swept up in that same act of magnifying our God. If we are in Christ, we too should rejoice in God our Savior because He has done great things for us. He has looked on us and provided us with full satisfaction and happiness in Him forever. He has exalted us from our humble estate, satisfying the deepest hunger of our hearts, and He continues to remember His mercy towards us. These are reasons to constantly magnify the Lord and rejoice in Him. I thought of an important truth while meditating on this passage. If the enemy cannot kill you, he will seek to steal your joy by distracting you with things that keep you from reflecting on the abundance of God’s mercy towards you. Recently, I reached out to my former pastor from Abu Dhabi while facing some personal discouragement, and he encouraged me to meditate on Habakkuk 3:17-19. I thought I would share it today as it fits with this idea. Habakkuk says, “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.” The prophet reminds us, through imagery of a fruitless harvest, that there are always reasons to rejoice and take joy in the God of our salvation because He is our strength and will exalt us in His timing. As I meditate on this and Mary’s rejoicing in God, I realized things have been distracting my own heart from this kind of rejoicing, but when I started to dwell on the mercy and grace of God towards me, I found my heart filled with joy again. Church, take time in this Christmas season to rejoice in the mercy God has shown to you and let it move your heart to magnify His name.

Conclusion:

As the worship team and choir are coming to lead us in a time of extended response together, think on the truths of God’s Word and ask the Spirit of God to move in your heart as He did in Mary. Maybe you need to turn in humility to God for the first time and ask for His mercy and saving grace. If so, all you need to do trust that Jesus Christ’s death on the cross was for your sin and pray to God for mercy. Maybe you have come to Christ for salvation, but you see pride in your heart and need to humble yourself before Him today. Maybe you need set your mind and heart on the mercy He has shown to you and ask the Spirit to cause you to rejoice in that mercy. As you respond to His grace, you are welcome to come and kneel before Him as a physical sign of the humble posture of your heart, or you can humbly come and request prayer from someone on our prayer team who you will find worshipping on the front rows or at the bottom of the stairs in the back. Let’s seek the Lord together and receive His mercy and grace in our need. Would you pray with me as we move into this time of response?