



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Grace is Greater

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Luke 1:39-56

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³⁹ 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. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. 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! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

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.*

*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;*

*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 offspring forever.”*

⁵⁶ *And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.*

(Pastor prays)

Every one of us needs a hero, someone we look to and point to and maybe even pattern our lives after. Right here in the passage before you there are two heroines, two women you can look and see. There is an old woman named Elizabeth and a young woman named Mary. Those two women, on opposite ends of the age spectrum, have been put before us by Luke as examples of faithfulness in hard times. They show us how to live with deep faith in God during difficulty.

Now the temptation is to look at those two women and find lessons about life from Mary and Elizabeth. And you can do that. That is a legitimate thing to do, but this morning I want to push you further. I want to go beyond just looking at these two women. I want to look to the God they believe in. Let's pick up the story in verse 39, and what I'd like to do is— just for a few minutes— go from verse 39 to verse 45 and read it with some running commentary so that you get a feel for the story and understand what Luke is doing. He is writing to his friend Theophilus and he's trying to convince him to put his faith in Jesus. And then after reading about the travels of Mary to see Elizabeth, I want to talk about her song. I'm hoping that when you walk out of here today you will believe that...

Whatever it is, By Grace God Will Get You Through It

And we've all got something that we've got to get through. Let's go to the story and join them there and watch God work. What do we learn from Mary's song? You learn that:

The Bible works

After going through the travel narrative, when you read all the way down, what you find is 13 references to the Old Testament. And not only that, you

find Mary patterning her prayer after Hannah in I Samuel. It is amazing how this young woman has so much Bible in her mind and heart.

If you started in verse 39, there the author tells us, “in those days.” What days are “those”? “Those days” are when Gabriel had gone to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and he told them that Elizabeth was going to be pregnant. Zechariah doesn’t believe him, so Gabriel strikes him mute. He can’t talk and Elizabeth is pregnant and the story shifts over to Mary. Mary is also visited by Gabriel, and he tells her that she will be pregnant with the King. So that’s where we are in verse 39. ³⁹ *In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah,* That’s about 70, 80, maybe 100 miles. That’s like walking from here to Greenville, S.C.

In this room right now we have some athletes who have trained for marathons: 30K or 50K or 100K. We’ve got a couple of elite athletes who have pressed it all the way up to 100 miles. (What is wrong with those people? 100 miles!) And then all of the training, all of the preparation, all that goes into that. And then you think about this young girl here. It probably took her 3 or 4 days to walk to her cousin’s house. Her cousin is an old lady but she’s pregnant. Notice what happened when she entered the house in verse 40. ⁴⁰ *and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* Don’t talk to Zechariah because he can’t talk back. (Zechariah’s in the corner waving, I guess.)

Mary greeted Elizabeth and when she did something happened in verse 41. ⁴¹ *And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit,* There are several things to see there. Right there is a picture from the Bible of a woman who is six months pregnant, and when she hears Mary, who’s carrying Jesus, come in the room and greet her, Elizabeth says the baby she is carrying—who is John the Baptist—leaped for joy when he heard her.

Now what you have here right in front of you is one of our texts in the Bible that points us to why we believe that life begins at conception. In this story

John the Baptist, who is six months in Elizabeth's womb, hears Mary and *leaps* for joy. So he can *hear*, he can *jump*, and he can *feel emotion*. So this is part of the reason we believe that life begins at conception.

Not only that but notice that the text says that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. As Christians we believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. God raised Him from the dead; He ascended into heaven. And the book of Acts tells us that when the Holy Spirit descended, the church was born. And the Holy Spirit will fill believers. Now here is a special dispensation. The Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth and you'll notice that the Holy Spirit always takes us to Jesus. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is not making you do crazy things. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is going to take you right to Christ.

And here is what Elizabeth says in verse 43. *43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?* She understands that Mary is carrying Jesus. How did she know that? She was filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit always takes us to Christ. Now Mary when she's traveling, we find her walking 75-100 miles, and she maybe wrote this song on her walk. It could have been 3 or 4 days. And when you read it you find out that it is saturated with the Bible. Mary had enrolled in Awana in her synagogue. Mary had been so exposed to the Bible it had saturated her mind that when she started the praise, what came out of her mouth was Bible. And one of the things I want you to see as we go into this passage is that the Bible *really* does work.

Now we don't worship the Bible here at Hickory Grove. But we believe that it is God's inerrant, inspired Word. God has given to us the Bible as a revelation. How do we hear from God? We read the Bible out loud. It is God speaking to us.

But more than that. The Bible always takes us to the Gospel. It is written in such a way that we see the creation: God created us. We see the fall into sin. You see that long time of living in sin, waiting for a Redeemer. And then

redemption. Jesus comes to save His people and establishes the church. And then we see the consummation, when Jesus comes back to get His church.

We find all of that in the Bible. You read the Magnificat and you know that the Bible works.

The bigger God is, the better you are

The bigger you understand and think about God, the better you are. Look at Mary's song in verses 46-47. Mary says the same thing in two different ways. It's parallelism. ⁴⁶ *And Mary said,*

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

I'll go at it backward. God is my savior; my spirit is rejoicing. Why? Because my soul has magnified the Lord. I have a BIG God. One of the problems we run into in the life we are living right now is that so many other things are bigger than your understanding of God. There is a book recommended to me by John Stegemerten titled, "When People Are Big & God Is Small." The premise of the book is that we are way too concerned about people and too little concerned about God. This is a scandal. In this passage is this young, unmarried, pregnant teenage girl. Joseph plans on putting her away quietly until an angel talks to him. And yet, what she says right here is that God is enlarged.

When I think about the bigness of God, when the Lordship of Christ is over my life and providence is working and I understand sovereignty and I trust God's plan... When that's going on, this problem I have seems small. And when it's small, verse 46 says, that's when I can rejoice. That's when the joy of the Lord becomes my strength.

What you have here is a picture of this blessed wonderful girl who is so faithful. She is giving us a deep understanding that if you will enlarge your

understanding of God, your problems won't go away, they will just shrink next to His immensity, the bigness of God. The bigger God is, the better you are.

Let me give you something else from the Magnificat.

If you get grace, you get the whole thing

We are going to try to understand the depth of God's grace. Let's read verse 48. *48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.*

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

We agree with Mary that she is blessed to be carrying the Messiah. The grace is found earlier in the verse. The temptation is to look on Mary and her humility and we say, okay, we need to be like Mary, but I don't think that is what her song is about. She is not saying that we should be *like* her; she is pointing to the good grace of God. In the phrase, she says, He looked at me. He noticed me. He saw me. When you sometimes feel like nobody sees and nobody cares, there He is. Here is grace. Not because of anything you have done, that would be earning salvation. Grace is that He looked at you when you were wallowing in your sin.

There is a passage in Ezekiel 16 that is a graphic picture of how God sees and saves His people. It's the image of a newborn child that doesn't have the umbilical cord cut yet. And for some reason that child has been abandoned and he's just barely holding onto his life and God says, "I came, and I saw you there. I picked you up and I cleaned you. I made you my own." That's the picture of God's grace. That's what Mary is saying. He saw me. This isn't Mother Mary, this is maid-servant Mary. This is God looking at her as He looks at us with eyes of grace even though we deserve the worst. This is us being pointed ultimately to the Gospel.

What is the Gospel? We teach that God is the holy creator who created everything, even you. The image of God in you has been disfigured by your own sin. Sin is a crime against God. God is not only loving and kind, He is also just and sin must be punished. We stand under the wrath of God. But our

loving God sends Jesus. Jesus is all God and all man. And so He comes to live in our place as a man. He lives perfectly, keeps the law of God. And then He goes as a man to the cross and takes the wrath of God for us. He takes our place and gives us His righteousness. And the way you become a Christian is you turn from trusting yourself and your sin and you turn to what Christ has done for you. That's grace. And if you get grace, you get the whole thing. Let me give you something else from the Magnificat.

Gratitude gets you ready for crisis

Gratitude. So God has chosen Mary to carry the Messiah. It sounds like a great thing. She even sings about being blessed. You see her being grateful. But there is a crisis coming. First of all, she is a pregnant young girl without a husband. Everybody thinks they know what has happened. We know she has to live and face all that. We know how hard it is even today. She is going into unknown territory but notice what she says in verse 49. ⁴⁸ *for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.*

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

She gives attributes of God. That word “mighty” comes from the Greek word *dunamis*. It's where we get the word “dynamite.” Powerful. Here is a young girl whose life has been hidden in a nowhere town. She has lived with a bad stigma and yet there is gratitude in her heart. She is grateful to God to have been chosen for this very thing. As a Christian, do you know what gratitude does if you learn to be thankful? A grateful heart gives you the ability to endure a whole lot of pain. If your heart is full of gratitude to God for His goodness and you are not asking “why is this happening to me,” you can endure. Often someone asking God “why is this happening to me?” is really them saying, “I deserve better.” If you have a heart that is not grateful, ingratitude can breed bitterness and resentment, you can become hard and angry. You think that all of this is against you. You miss out. Even during times of trial you need to write down all the things that you are grateful for. Start with something small, something tangible, that you are grateful for —maybe your family. And then start adding to that list. Start thanking God and watch

as you start building this repository of gratitude into your heart. If you do that, learn to be thankful, you learn to walk through crisis.

Let's look at two things in verses 49 and 50. ⁴⁹ *for he who is mighty has done great things for me,*

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ *And his mercy is for those who fear him*

from generation to generation.

The holiness of God centers us

This is what Mary teaches us in verse 49. And holy is His name. Without sin is His name. He is completely pure and powerful. Holy is His name. It's His character. It's His purpose. Holy is His work. When you get a hold of the holiness of God, His holiness takes us back to our sinfulness. And that's when we are ready to put our faith in the Gospel of Jesus. The Gospel tells us that there is one mediator between God and people. And that is the man, Christ Jesus. Holiness.

Let's go a little further into it. Verse 50 brings us out of holiness and into fear.

The fear of God saves us

I did not expect to preach the fear of God, but notice how Mary says it in verse 50. ⁵⁰ *And his mercy is for those who fear him*

from generation to generation.

This is not only standing in awe of God. I mean *afraid*. It's good for us to remember that our God is a holy God who punishes sin. And it's only by God's grace that He didn't strike us dead in our sleep because we are covered by the blood of Jesus. But the wrath of God is a real thing. Romans says the condemnation rests on those who are not in Christ. Mary says that when people realize that, they fear God. And God sees the response as you turn from yourself to Christ.

Those who fear God receive mercy. This is the Gospel. We are not saved just so we can be nicer and more peaceful and more stable. I hope all those things

happen, but you are saved because, under the wrath of God, you deserve damnation in Hell. But God in His grace has given us Jesus who took it all for us. I don't want to face that fear. It makes me want to run quickly to the cross of Jesus. And there, those of us who fear God receive mercy. It's the fear of God that saves us.

Let's look at verse 51.

God hates pride

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

James 4:6 says it clearer for us. ⁶ *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* God humbles us to make us understand our need. We go through hard times and have physical ailments to make us understand our need. As we age our bodies become more and more decrepit. As we age, we become more and more dependent and thankful and worshipful. You give yourself deeply. Age shouldn't make us hard; it should make us long for Christ more. God hates pride. Discipline hurts, but we receive discipline because we feel like we can do it on our own. And then we are touched like Jacob's hip. We need. The worst thing that can happen is that you can be so prideful that you don't think you need God. Proud people aren't saved. The people who are saved are those who fear God and see the beauty of the Gospel and run to it.

Let's get through this last bit quickly.

God can handle our current world mess

You are a Christian. Stop panicking. The God you serve saved you in Jesus and loves you. He put you in this time in history to live faithfully, no matter what. Mary says in verses 51 and 52, *⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;*

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

⁵²he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

God can do whatever He wants. That ought to instill confidence in your hearts that God is still on the throne. This is His world, and you are His child. And if you are an ambassador for Christ, you are right where you are supposed to be. What does it look like to glorify God when it is terrible? Mary lived in a terrible time. What's going to happen to her is going to be so difficult. And yet... The writer of Proverbs 21:1 says, *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.* I'm not denying that the state of our world is terrible. We are losing our rights; the freedom of speech is being taken away. I think we will lose tax-exempt status for churches. I think it's coming that if I preach the Bible, it will be illegal, but we don't worry about all that. God put us here for this very thing, to live faithfully.

We learn from Mary in verse 53 that

God is a kind provider

*⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.*

Here is an act of kindness, an act of mercy. Here is why we do the ministries that we do that don't translate into people coming into our church, the ministries of mercy that clothe people and put food in their stomachs. Why? Because God does it. Because there is a perfect tangible picture of the Gospel of Jesus. We preach the Gospel, but there is a picture of God loving us in our need and providing Jesus Christ for us.

Here is the last point.

We can always count on mercy

She ends her song in verse 54. *⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,*

That mercy is seen in the Old Testament as it points to the coming One, the advent of Jesus. It is the Gospel of God found in Jesus. And I just want to say one more thing. Christmas can be so profoundly hard for so many people.

This song sung here by this teenage girl tells us that, whatever it is, by grace God will get you through.

What do you need? Forgiveness, come give your life to Christ, be forgiven and washed clean. Do you need healing? You've been hurt so bad that the bitterness is like poison. Come and pray and let someone pray with you. Do you need peace? Come pray for the peace of God that passes understanding. Do you need direction in your life? God has brought you here. He is clearly *for* you. You have given your life to Christ; He will give you direction. Do you need hope? It's amazing what just a little bit of hope can do. God gives us that hope in Jesus.

(Pastor prays)