

The Magnificat

Luke 1:46-55

The passage before us is often referred to as *The Magnificat*. It is the Latin word for “magnify” which is how Mary begins her song: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” And what a song it is! It is a song of truth for an age of deception. It is a song of hope for an age of cynicism. In reading the words carefully we come to notice that Mary’s song is, as one scholar puts it, “a virtual collage of biblical texts.” Every line is drawn either directly or indirectly from the Scriptures which Mary had learned at home and in the synagogue. It bears certain resemblances to the songs of Miriam (Ex. 15:19-21), Deborah (Judg. 5:1-31), and especially of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10), all of which Mary would have known.

Blessed are the Believers

Vv. 43-45 – “...And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” – Mary’s older cousin Elizabeth recognizes and blesses Mary for her belief in the words of God. The whole tenor of Mary’s Song is one of confidence in God’s Word. She knows the Scripture which she was taught since infancy. Her song borrows directly from the words and theological categories of the Old Testament. Mary’s faith is made clear from the manner in which God’s Word had captured her mind and imagination. Believing faith is never without specific content. Notice some of the content of her faith.

1. God is praiseworthy

- **Vv. 46-47** – “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...” – Mary’s knowledge of God issued forth in praise. Good theology is always doxological. “Magnifies” denotes a continual act.¹

2. God is kind.

- **Vs. 48** – “...for he has looked upon the humble estate of his servant...” – Mary rejoices that God Almighty has stooped to “look upon” her. In contrast to the world, God is kind to the humble.

3. God is Almighty.

- **Vs. 49** – “...for he who is mighty has done great things for me.” – God’s might is not like the impersonal power of a tsunami. Rather, God’s might is exercised in harmony with all of his perfections. This is why Mary can sing of God’s might being exercised to do “great things” for her.

4. God is holy.

- **Vs. 49** – “...and holy is his name.” – God is not to be thought of only in terms of power but of holiness; one whose purity is unmixed with anything unclean. God is holy and therefore is his name.

5. God is faithful.

- **Vs. 50** – “And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” – This the language of covenant. Just as we read in verse 55: “...as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” What has happened in the womb of Mary is in fulfillment to what God promised Abraham. The coming of Jesus into the world is the answer to God’s gracious covenant with Abraham, further ratified with Moses and later with David. This is why the very first Christian sermon preached in Jerusalem by Peter at Pentecost was a proclamation of God’s covenant with Abraham, the Covenant of Grace.

Sinners and Their Savior

Vs. 47 – “...and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” – We may add to Mary’s knowledge of the Lord, the knowledge she possesses of herself. Mary was an exemplary young woman. She was clearly taught well and had a love for God and his word. But to paraphrase J.C. Ryle, even the best of people are people at best. Mary, like every descendent of Adam, came into this world as a sinner. Contrary to what the church of Rome confesses, Mary was indeed born in original sin like the rest of humanity. She is not a Co-Redemptrix or Co-Mediatrix with Christ. Such doctrines are blasphemous. For all of her exemplary qualities, Mary was a sinner who needed a Savior. And she knew this.

Vs. 48a – “For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.” – This not false humility. Mary comes, quite literally, from a “humble estate.” Every circumstance of her life places her low on the world’s totem pole of recognition. She is a first century Jew, a people whose kingdom has been lost to Rome. Further, Mary is a not only a woman, but a teenager. She is betrothed not to a priest or a wealthy farmer but to a

¹ Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) p. 84

man of humble means. She doesn't even live within the precincts of Jerusalem but in a small town in Galilee called Nazareth. There is nothing Mary can claim which would make her worthy of what she is receiving from the Lord. She does not offer the Lord a list of her merits but an acknowledgment of her lowliness.

Vs. 50 – “And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” – This is the familiar language of God's gracious covenant of grace (Genesis, 12, 15, 17). As Peter preached at Pentecost: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39).

The Great Reversal

The central theme of the Magnificat is that through the Son that Mary bears in her womb, God will bring about a great reversal of the world's sinful order. The proud will be brought low and the lowly will be lifted up. But these are not political categories nor do they belong to mere social status. The gospel of Mary's Son will be about the salvation of sinners and the dawning of a new creation. These themes will be echoed in Jesus' sermon on the Mount, particularly the Beatitudes where He pronounces blessing upon those who are “poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In contrast to the values of the world, Jesus tells us that the way to blessedness and joy and peace is through humility, a lowliness in which the sin-weary flee to the Savior.

Vs. 51-53 – It is certainly true that God has pity upon those who are treated unjustly by those who wield power. But God's grace is not merited simply by being poor and exploited. Mary's song is not holding forth the Christianized Marxism of Liberation Theology. As Jesus does in his Sermon on the Mount, the categories of poverty and hunger here are referring to that spiritual sort of brokenness that characterizes humbled sinners who long for the filling of God's gracious salvation.

Vv. 54-55 – This again is the language of covenant. Ultimately, these words are not directed to a nation or ethnicity. “Israel,” in this sense should be taken to mean what Paul termed “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16) that is, the multi-national church of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of all that was anticipated in national Israel. As one theologian puts it:

Mary specifically looked to and knew of God's promise to Abraham – the promise that God would give him an heir, a promise that Paul calls the gospel: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham” (Gal. 3:8-9). Mary was blessed along with Abraham because she possessed faith in the promised Messiah.²

You'll notice that the verbs in these verses are in the past tense (The Greek *aorist*). On one level, Mary is likely referring to great works of grace and power that God performed in the past, such as his deliverance of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. But in a way that is characteristic of OT prophecy, Mary's words certainly point to events which, having begun, will find their conclusion in the future. In this case she is speaking of the Messiah through whom God is about to scatter the proud and bring the mighty down from their thrones while he brings salvation to the humble and believing.

Mary's Song is a model expression of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Oftentimes we reduce faith in Jesus to extra-biblical slogans like “ask Jesus into your heart” or having “a personal relationship with Jesus.” The problem with such statements is not only that they are not found in Scripture but that they fail to capture the robust nature of saving faith. It is certainly true that one does not need to have been steeped in all the language of systematic theology in order to be a Christian. Thank God for that! Nevertheless, saving faith in Jesus requires the knowledge that God is the Savior of sinners. It means that we must have some degree of knowledge that God is holy and sin is costly. It means understanding that the price of our sin was paid by Jesus at the cross and that our hope is bound up in his empty tomb. It means believing that God resists the proud but graciously welcomes those who humble themselves and flee to Christ.

“If our riches are proportionate to Christ's poverty, what rich people we are! He was poor as poor can be; and we, if we are believing in him, are as rich as rich can be. So low as he went, so high do we rise.”

- Charles Spurgeon

² John Fesko, *The Birth of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2022) p. 17