

My Soul Magnifies the Lord (Luke 1:39–56)

The Fruit of the Spirit Is Joy

I could not love Thee, so blind and unfeeling;
Covenant promises fell not to me.
Then without warning, desire, or deserving,
I found my treasure, my pleasure in Thee.

I have no merit to woo or delight Thee,
I have no wisdom or pow'rs to employ;
Yet in Thy mercy, how pleasing Thou find'st me,
This is Thy pleasure: that Thou art my joy.¹

The burden of this sermon is: (1) to explain *why* Mary's soul magnified the Lord, *why* her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior; and (2) to argue that Mary's joy is not unique, but rather is common to all who know God as Savior in Christ Jesus our Lord. In other words, the point of this sermon is not to inform you that Mary was happy; I'm not sure how that would benefit anyone. Rather, the point of this sermon is to invite you into that same happiness, and on the other hand, to warn you that, as the 17th century Anglican Jeremy Taylor wrote, "God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy."² For joy is of the essence of saving faith.

I will return to this theme at the end, but I want to give you a little preview of where I'm headed. In today's text we will observe three individuals encounter the incarnate Christ, and the response of each is joy. The infant John, six months in utero, encounters Jesus in embryonic form, and leaps for joy. Elizabeth recognizes that Mary is carrying her Lord, and cries out in joy. Mary reflects upon the significance of the baby in her womb and sings for joy. Is this coincidence, or is this a paradigm of what happens whenever *anyone* encounters the mercy of

¹ John Piper, *What Is Saving Faith? Reflections on Receiving Christ as a Treasure* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 7.

² Quoted in John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist, 2011; orig. 1986), 9.

God in Christ? I am going to argue the latter, that joy is the experience of all who encounter God's saving mercy through Christ. Jesus will later say in his parables of the kingdom,

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sell all that he has and buys that field." (Mt 13:44)

No one obtains the treasure (Christ and His kingdom), unless he sells all that he has; and no one will sell all that he has in order to obtain the treasure unless he is convinced that the treasure (Christ and His kingdom) is worth more than all he has. But this is not all, for the man sells all that he out of his "joy," and no one will rejoice to sell all that he has unless he is convinced that the treasure he is obtaining (Christ and His kingdom) is worth *far* more, *infinitely* more, than all he is giving up. The point of this parable is that this is how someone obtains Christ and His kingdom; in other words, this is what saving faith is like.

Therefore, I conclude that joy in Christ is of the essence of saving faith in Christ.

According to Jesus, to ask someone:

- Do you believe in Christ?
- Do you treasure Christ above all the treasures and pleasures of this world?
- Do you rejoice to give up all the treasures and pleasures of the world in order to obtain Christ?

is to ask one and the same question. There are not two types of Christians: those who treasure Christ above all the treasures and pleasures of this world and those who do not; those who find more joy in Christ than in all the treasures and pleasures of this world and those who do not. Rather, there are those who treasure Christ, those who rejoice in Christ above all the treasures and pleasures of this world, and there are non-Christians. For joy is of the essence of saving faith. To be sure, indwelling sin obscures and diminishes this joy, and that must be taken into account. I do not mean to suggest that Christians are perfectly or perpetually happy. But the older I get, the more I read the Bible, and the longer I live the Christian life, the more convinced I become that perpetually grumpy, cranky Christians or perennially disinterested, apathetic Christians, are in fact, non-Christians. For the fruit of the Spirit is joy, and that point is driven home in today's text.

The *Magnificat*

This morning, we will look at Mary’s famous *Magnificat*, the song of praise that erupted from her heart on the occasion of her meeting with Elizabeth. *Magnificat* comes from the opening line in Latin—*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” We will look at two aspects of the *Magnificat*: its context and its content.

I. The Context of the *Magnificat* (1:39–45)

The *context* of the *Magnificat* is found in vv. 39–45. Let’s work through this section a verse at a time, and then we will reflect upon three truths that are foundational to understanding what it means to magnify the Lord and to rejoice in God our Savior.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. (1:39–40)

“In those days” could mean anything; the Greek phrase “signifies an indeterminate time.”³ But the fact that Luke adds that Mary “arose and went with haste” (ἐπορεύθη μετὰ σπουδῆς), combined with the fact that Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was already in her sixth month of pregnancy (1:36) and we are told that Mary “remained with Elizabeth about three months” (presumably, until John was born), does not leave any time to spare. She must have left immediately following the angelic visitation, which is another sign of her faith.⁴ As most women do not know they are pregnant until several weeks following conception, Mary likely had no physical indication that she was expecting; she had only the angelic word. Nor was there any reason to believe that her relative Elizabeth was pregnant (remember that she was aged and barren) other than the word of the angel. In other words, Mary’s voyage is an act of pure faith. Her trip “into the hill country, to a town in Judah” was long and arduous. Luke does not name the hometown of Zechariah and Elizabeth, but we do know that Jerusalem (also in the hill country of Judea) lay “sixty rocky-and-hilly miles” south of Nazareth, which would have taken some three days of travel on foot.⁵

³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel of Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 51–52.

⁴ David E. Garland, *Luke*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 91.

⁵ Edwards, 52.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. (1:41a)

John would have been sixth months in utero, or about twelve inches and two pounds. You will remember Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah that John would be "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (1:15). The word translated "leaped" (ἐσκίρτησεν; σκιρτάω) is only used by Luke in the New Testament, but it is used in the LXX of Malachi 4:2:

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings. You shall go out leaping [σκιρτήσετε] like calves from the stall. (Mal 4:2)

Malachi describes the joy that the faithful will experience when the sun of righteousness (the Messiah) dawns; they will leap like calves from the stall. Well, in Christ Jesus the sun of righteousness has dawned, and John somehow experiences that joy and leaps like a calf in Elizabeth's womb.

Sometimes people make more out of this than I think is warranted, as though it proves the possibility of infant regeneration or even infant faith; sometimes this is connected to arguments for paedobaptism.⁶ So let's deal with this for a few moments. Was John regenerate even from his mother's womb? Did he recognize the presence of Christ in some conscious, cognitive sense? *If* John was regenerate, and *if* John recognized the presence of Christ in some conscious, cognitive sense, I still do not think this would provide a sound argument for infant regeneration as a normative work of God, and therefore for paedobaptism as a normative act of the church, simply because of the extraordinary nature of John's ministry. John was a one-of-a-kind figure fulfilling a one-of-a-kind ministry; it would be tenuous to make him a paradigm for anything ordinary or normative. But I do not think it is necessary to infer that John was regenerate in his mother's womb, or that he recognized Jesus in some conscious, cognitive sense. I think that may be reading too much into the phrase "filled with the Holy Spirit" in 1:15. I would remind you that John belongs more to the old covenant than to the new. This is why Jesus says,

⁶ For example, see Jared Longshore, "Mark Dever, Regenerate Babies, and Gospel Protectors," *Reformation & Revival*, July 11, 2023, <https://jaredrlongshore.com/2023/07/11/mark-dever-regenerate-babies-and-gospel-protectors/#:~:text=Voetius%2C%20the%2016th%20century%20Dutch,%2C%20II%2C%20410%E2%80%9393412>; Mark Jones, "Paedobaptists Are Credobaptists," *Reformation21*, March 3, 2025, <https://reformation21.org/paedobaptists-are-credobaptists/>. Neither of these articles make reference to John the Baptist, but both posit infant regeneration and connect it to paedobaptism.

“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”
(Mt 11:11)

And I would remind you that in the old covenant, the Holy Spirit at times came upon people who were apparently unregenerate and filled them, with the result that they prophesied (one thinks of Saul [1 Sm 10:6, 10] or Balaam [Nm 21:5, 16; 24:2]), or performed great feats (one thinks of Samson [Jgs 14:6, 19]). For that matter, it was presumably the Holy Spirit who opened the donkey’s mouth to rebuke Balaam (Nm 22:28). I’m not saying that John was unregenerate while in Elizabeth’s womb; I’m certainly not suggesting that John was wicked like Saul or Balaam or Samson in his younger days. I’m merely pointing out that under the old covenant especially, there was no necessary connection between being filled with the Holy Spirit and being regenerate. It is at least possible that the infant John was filled with the Holy Spirit such that he experienced overwhelming joy (1:44) in the presence of the Son of God in a manner consistent with an infant that age, without being regenerate or without exercising conscious faith. Paedobaptists will have to make their arguments from better grounds. Anyway, back to the text...

*And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry,
“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” (1:41b–45)*

While I am not convinced that we can interpret John’s joyful jump as an indication of a regenerate heart or of saving faith (though I am not dismissing the possibility; the Lord can do whatever He pleases), Elizabeth is a different story. I do think we are justified in seeing Elizabeth’s response to meeting Jesus as a paradigm for how anyone responds upon truly seeing Jesus and finding in Him their soul’s treasure. What can we learn from Elizabeth’s response?

First, recognizing Christ as the treasure of your soul begins with a revelatory work of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth’s recognition that she was in the presence of Christ did not come by

natural knowledge. She had no way of knowing about Mary’s dream or Mary’s pregnancy. Rather, she heard the sound of Mary’s greeting, the baby leapt in her womb, and she just *knew*. She knew that the movement she felt was not the natural movement a pregnant mother feels around twenty-five weeks, but was, in fact, her baby leaping “for joy” (ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει). In other words, she knew that her baby was already beginning to fulfill his calling—pointing people to the Messiah (Jn 1:29). She knew that Mary was with child, though Mary had not told her and she certainly was not showing yet. She knew that the baby in Mary’s womb was her “Lord” (κυρίου)—that is, the divine Messiah for whom she waited, the child who would be both Son of God and Son of Man.⁷ And she knew that Mary had received a message from the Lord, and that Mary had believed that message. Elizabeth should not have known *any* of these things; and yet, she did. How? The answer is given in v. 41: “And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” Indeed, that is how anyone anywhere recognizes Christ as the treasure of their soul. Whether you are six months in utero, or sixty years old, no one sees Jesus as Christ the Lord apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Again, I am not suggesting that John was born again before he was born the first time, nor that Elizabeth was not born again until this moment. But I do think this is a Scriptural emblem of a spiritual truth. It is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to behold the glory of Christ, and opens our hearts to rejoice in Him.

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 4:3–6, one of the clearest passages dealing with this truth. In vv. 3–4, the apostle Paul writes,

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Cor 4:3–4)

That is our state by nature; we are blind to the glory of Christ revealed in the gospel. When confronted with the gospel of the Son of God incarnate, crucified, risen, and exalted, we do not see glory, and therefore, our hearts do not rejoice. But under the sovereign, penetrating, awakening, regenerating ministry of the Holy Spirit, the scales of sin fall from our eyes and we

⁷ “Elizabeth’s reference to Mary as ‘the mother of my Lord’ (v. 43) is significant because the ‘Lord (Gk. *kyrios*), which in the LXX is the default rendering of YHWH, clearly refers to Jesus. What is conceived in Mary’s womb can be described only in the language proper to Israel’s unique and incomparable God”; Edwards, 53.

see in Jesus the long-awaited Messianic Savior and King, who is both God and man, two complete and distinct natures forever united in one Person. We see Him who took our place under the law, rendering to God the perfect righteousness we failed to attain, the one who upon the cross suffered and satisfied the righteous wrath of God against our sin, that God may be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. We see Him risen from the dead and exalted to God's right hand, holding the keys of Death and Hell, able and willing to save all those who call upon His name. Paul describes this enlightening, awakening work of the Spirit in the next verses:

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:5–6)

This knowledge, this sight, is not attained by natural means. People far more intelligent, far more insightful, far more religious than us look at Jesus and see *nothing*, feel *nothing*. And yet we see, and we rejoice. Why? Because it is only when the Spirit enlightens our minds and awakens our souls that we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Second, recognizing Christ as the treasure of your soul produces abounding joy. Again, we may look at Elizabeth as a paradigm for what happens when any believer encounters the presence of Christ under the revelatory power of the Holy Spirit. Look again at the sequence of events, because they are instructive. First, Elizabeth hears the sound of Mary's greeting. Then, the baby leaps for joy in her womb. Then, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she is flooded with joy, and out of her joy she begins to shout—she “exclaimed with a loud cry” (ἀνεφώνησεν κραυγῇ μεγάλῃ), which Edwards calls “a redundancy of unrestrained joy.”⁸ All of these events occurred instantaneously. The point I wish to emphasize is that Elizabeth did not make a decision to rejoice; joy was not an exercise of her will, but rather a reflex emotion of her soul, an affection emerging instantaneously and reflexively out of a heart awakened by the Holy Spirit to “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Again, this points to the truth that joy is of the essence of saving faith; it is not an optional addendum to saving faith. To receive Christ as the treasure of your soul is to rejoice in Christ as the treasure of your soul.

⁸ Edwards, 53.

There can be no joy in Christ where there is no faith in Christ; and where there is no joy in Christ, it is because there is no faith in Christ.

Third, recognizing Christ as the treasure of your soul inevitably results in worship. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (v. 42). It is true that Elizabeth pronounces a blessing upon Mary; in fact, she does so twice (vv. 42, 45). Pronouncing a blessing upon a human being is a declaration that God has blessed or will bless that individual (cf. Nm 6:22–27). But pronouncing a blessing upon God is an act of worship. David sings,

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me
bless his holy name! (Ps 103:1)*

And so, in pronouncing a blessing upon the fruit of Mary’s womb, whom Elizabeth knows (by the Spirit!) is her Lord (v. 43), Elizabeth is worshiping the Lord. And thus, the sequence of events is complete: Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting, the infant John is filled with the Holy Spirit and leaps with joy in her womb, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth recognizes by the Spirit that she is in the presence of the Christ, Elizabeth is filled with joy and erupts in worship. Not every element of that sequence is paradigmatic, but the three core elements are the same for every person who savingly encounters Christ:

- The Holy Spirit awakens the soul and reveals that in Christ is the glory of God incarnate, and in His cross is the power and wisdom of God to save (1 Cor 1:18, 24).
- This revelation of the Holy Spirit produces abounding joy.
- This abounding joy finds its outlet in worship.

I was reading this week J. C. Ryle’s comments upon this passage. Ryle (1816–1900) was Bishop of Liverpool, an evangelical pastor in a day when evangelical believers in the Church of England were rare. Every time Bishop Ryle preached, he knew he was preaching to many unconverted, nominal Christians who had been baptized into the church as infants but had not been baptized into Christ by the Holy Spirit. So when he preached on this text, he pressed home to his parish congregation the difference between genuine and counterfeit faith, between a faith that is merely traditional, or intellectual, but not experiential. Commenting on the benediction Elizabeth speaks upon Mary’s faith (“Blessed is she who believed”), Ryle wrote,

Do you know anything of this precious faith? This, after all, is the question that concerns us. Do we know anything of the faith of God's elect, the faith which is of the operation of God? (*Titus* 1:2; *Col.* 2:12). Let us never rest till we know it by experience. Once knowing it, let us never cease to pray that our faith may grow exceedingly. Better a thousand times be rich in faith than rich in gold. Gold will be worthless in the unseen world to which we are all travelling. Faith will be owned in that world by God the Father and the holy angels. When the great white throne is set, and the books are opened, when the dead are called from their graves, and receiving their final sentence, the value of faith will at length be fully known. Men will learn then, if they never learned before, how true are the words, "Blessed are they that believed."⁹

Do you know anything of this precious faith? Do you possess this faith that is the operation of God's Spirit? This faith that inevitably and necessarily results in the joy of sin forgiven at the revelation of God's glory in Christ? Do not rest until you do.

II. The Content of the *Magnificat*

Let's look now to the *content* of Mary's *Magnificat*. In this song, Mary expresses her joy in God (vv. 46–47), then provides four grounds for her joy: God's compassion toward her personally (vv. 48–49), God's mercy toward all who fear Him (v. 50), God's upheaval of the present fallen order (vv. 51–53), and God's faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham (vv. 54–55). We will look briefly at each section.

First, Mary expresses her great joy:

And Mary said,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; (1:46–47)*

There are three notes to make from this opening.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke, Volume I* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012; orig. 1858), 25–26.

- First, notice that Mary is rejoicing (ἠγαλλίασεν—“to rejoice exceedingly”¹⁰), as well as Elizabeth and John, which serves to further emphasize the point of this sermon—namely, that joy is of the essence of saving faith. Joy pervades Luke’s infancy narratives. Elizabeth rejoices, John rejoices, Zechariah rejoices (eventually), the angels rejoice, the shepherds rejoice, Simeon rejoices, Anna rejoices. Why? Because this is what faith does at the revelation of Christ. The gospel is, after all, “good news of great joy” (2:10).
- Second, if this opening sounds familiar to you, this is because it is very similar to Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2. In fact, according to one commentator, the *Magnificat* “either quotes from or alludes to verses from Genesis, Deuteronomy, 1 and 2 Samuel, Job, Psalms, Ezekiel, Micah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.”¹¹ What does that tell us? It tells us that Mary was steeped in the Bible, such that when she rejoiced, her joy found expression in the words of Scripture. Even though saving faith is the sovereign operation of the Spirit, it is not coincidental that it occurs most often in the hearts of those who have been taught the Scriptures. Parents, you cannot make your children believers; you cannot awaken them to saving faith. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. But you can prepare your child’s heart through the teaching of the Scriptures, such that when faith comes, it finds fertile soil in a Scripture-saturated heart. Likewise, if you had to answer “no” to the question Bishop Ryle posed above (“Do you know anything of this precious faith?”), do not be passive and simply wait for faith to come. Take Ryle’s advice and do not rest until you know it by experience. Saturate your heart with Scripture, for faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ (Rom 10:17). It is amazing how saving faith comes most often where the Scriptures are most often read and heard.¹²

¹⁰ ἠγαλλίασεν is in the aorist tense, rather than the present tense like “magnifies” (μεγαλύνει), with which it is in parallel. The ESV and NIV translate it in the present tense; the NASB and KJV in the past tense. If there is a past, completed aspect to the verb, then it probably refers to the joy Mary experienced in the angelic annunciation.

¹¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke: Volume 1*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 46. Ryken cites Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, rev. ed., Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 358–60.

¹² “[Mary] had been raised on the Scriptures. She sang them at home and heard them at the synagogue. So when the plan of salvation intersected with her life, she was able to offer God the right kind of praise”; Ryken, 46. See also Ryle, 27.

- Finally, as I pointed out last week, Mary knew she needed a Savior. “My heart rejoices in God my Savior.” Only sinners need a Savior. Again, this should put an end to any thought of Mary being sinless, or being immaculately conceived, or being in any way qualified to stand as “Mediatrice of all graces” or as “Co-redemptrix, and thus qualified to receive either prayer or worship. Mary was a sinner in need of a Savior, a daughter of Adam in need of a righteousness not her own, a righteousness accomplished for her through the life of Christ, and an atonement offered on her behalf through the death of Christ.

After expressing her great joy, Mary lists four reasons for her joy. First, Mary rejoices because of God’s compassion toward her personally.

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. (1:48–49)

Personally, Mary rejoices in the salvation that God is bringing to pass through the child she carries in her womb. Mary was aware of her sin; she was aware of her low condition; she was aware that she had no rightful claim upon God’s mercy. The salvation about to come to her was to come by free grace. I am inclined to understand “humble estate” (ταπεινώσις) primarily in a spiritual sense rather than in a socio-economic sense—that is, as descriptive of Mary’s spiritual state before God, not her socio-economic state (although she was certainly from among the poor and oppressed class). The reason I say this is because there is a clear reversal happening throughout this song: the humble are exalted, and the exalted are humbled; the poor are made rich, and the rich are made poor. This cannot be understood only, or even primarily, in a socio-economic sense. For when we look at Jesus’ ministry, we find that while He gathered to Himself *mostly* those from the lower socio-economic classes, this was not *always* the case (cf. Jn 19:38–42); but *everyone* Jesus called to Himself was poor in spirit, and *none* were so proud as to deny their need of a Savior. I’m not denying that there is often a correlation between material poverty and spiritual poverty, between material prosperity and spiritual pride. Nor am I denying the truth that the vast majority of those whom God calls are *not* from among the powerful, noble, or wise

according to the world (1 Cor 1:26–29). Nor am I denying that *one* of the reasons all generations will call Mary blessed is because of the unique privilege she enjoyed as the mother of the Messiah. What I *am* saying is that if Mary were not poor in spirit, she would not have been saved, whether or not she was poor in terms of her earthly possessions. This is why Mary’s song is relevant to and descriptive of every believer—not only those chosen to carry the Messiah in their womb, and not only those from among the socio-economically impoverished. *Anyone* who has experienced the grace of God in Christ can sing with Mary:

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. (1:48–49)

So Mary’s *Magnificat* is, first of all, a song of praise to God for her personal salvation.

Next, Mary rejoices because God’s mercy is upon all who fear Him.

And his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation. (1:50)

In other words, mercy is not just for Mary; it is for everyone who fears God. Note that it is not that God gives mercy *because* we fear Him. That would be to put the cart before the horse, for no one fears the LORD apart from God’s mercy. Paul wrote in Romans 3:18, quoting from David in Psalm 36:1:

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Rom 3:18; Ps 36:1)

Mary is not establishing a cause-and-effect relationship, but a one-to-one correlation. Those who receive God’s mercy are those who fear Him. The holy fear of the LORD, the fear that is the fruit of grace, is not a cowering, slavish terror, but a deep, soul-stirring reverence of and affection for the convergence of God’s majesty and mercy, His grace and glory, in Christ. It is not Adam hiding from the presence of God among the trees of the Garden (Gn 3:8); it is Moses falling on

his face in worship at Sinai (Ex 34:8). It is not the Garasenes begging Jesus to leave their country because they feared His power (Mk 5:17); it is Peter saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68–69). It is being captivated and comforted, yet reverently cautious, before the God who is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29).

Third, Mary rejoices because what God has done for her is a paradigm for what He will do wherever His kingdom extends. Through the child in her womb, God will upheave and overturn the fallen world order.

*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. (1:51–53)*

These verses contain a series of six aorist (past-tense, complete action) verbs describing the acts of God:

- He has “shown strength” (ἐποίησεν κράτος) with his arm;
- He has “scattered” (διεσκόρπισεν) the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
- He has “brought down” (καθεῖλεν) the mighty from their thrones;
- He has “exalted” (ὑψώσεν) those of humble estate;
- He has “filled” (ἐνέπλησεν) the hungry with good things;
- He has “sent away” (ἐξάπεστείλεν) the rich with nothing.

To which past events does Mary refer? I don’t think that is what Mary is doing. I think she is using what is known as the “prophetic past tense,” speaking of future acts of God as so certain that she speaks of them as though they had already come to pass.¹³ And since the *Magnificat* is prompted by the first advent of the Messiah, I think Mary, in a spirit of prophecy, is referring to

¹³ “It is perhaps more likely that [Mary] is looking forward in a spirit of prophecy and counting what God will do as so certain that it can be spoken of as accomplished (this is frequent in the Old Testament prophets)”; Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988), 93.

events that are inaugurated at His first advent, but consummated at His second, when He returns to save the humble, and to judge the proud. At His return, and beginning even now in a spiritual sense within His church, there will be a great reversal; Jesus will turn the social and political order upon its head. The powerful will be pulled down from their thrones, and the rich will be cast away with nothing; yet the humble will be exalted, and the hungry will be filled. Though, as I said earlier, I think the primary referent is to spiritual poverty and spiritual pride, these words ought to make those who live comfortable lives of material wealth distinctly unconformable. This kind of language permeated Jesus' ministry. To the rich fool who built bigger barns to store his stuff while he lived in self-indulgent luxury, God said,

“‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”
(Lk 12:20–21)

The rich man is cast into hell, while the poor man is ushered by angels into heaven (Lk 16:19–31). And what is Jesus' summary of that parable?

“But Abraham said [to the rich man], ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.’” (Lk 16:25)

Jesus is something of a revolutionary, upending the social order of fallen human society. Jesus is not your posterchild for a capitalism in which greed is a virtue to be cultivated. Neither is he an advocate for socialism, in which the state becomes the people's god-like provider. Rather, Jesus is the head of a church in which people store up treasure in heaven, and use their wealth and influence, not as a means of accumulating power and money, but as a mean of relieving burdens. This revolutionary activity is occurring now through the preaching of the gospel and the ministry of the church, but will come to its consummation at the judgment on the last day, and in the everlasting kingdom that Christ will establish upon the earth.¹⁴

¹⁴ My thoughts on this section were guided by Ryken 49–52. For instance, Ryken writes, “Now Christ is busy turning things upside down in the world. He does not leave things as they are. He does not stand for the status

Finally, Mary rejoices because of God's faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham.

*“He has helped¹⁵ his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”*

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. (1:54–56)

In Christ Jesus, in the baby Mary carried in her womb, God was fulfilling His promise to Abraham and to his offspring forever. This is the Abrahamic covenant as it was an historical expression of the covenant of grace. And this covenant was the hope of the righteous remnant of Israel throughout the generations. As I have taught many times before in my expositions of texts like Romans 4 and Galatians 3, the promise to Abraham had four essential components:

- People—God promised that the children of Abraham would outnumber the stars (Gn 15:5).
- Place—God promised to Abraham and his offspring the land of Canaan (Gn 13:14–15; 17:8).
- Pardon—God forgave Abraham his sins, justifying him by faith (Gn 15:6).
- Presence—God promised to dwell in the midst of His people, to be their God (Gn 15:7–8).

The New Testament abundantly demonstrates that this promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ. The promise of a people is fulfilled in the church, the people of Christ:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:7, 29)

quo; in that sense, he is not a conservative. He is radical, subversive, revolutionary. This is why it is so deadly for the church to follow the culture. Jesus opposes the pride that rules the world, and if we are on the side of injustice, he is opposed to us”; Ibid., 51. Likewise, Morris writes, “There is a revolutionary note about filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty. In the ancient world it was accepted that the rich would be well cared for. Poor people must expect to be hungry. But Mary sings of a God who is not bound by what people do. He turns human attitudes and orders of society upside down”; Morris, 94.

¹⁵ “Has helped” (ἄντελόμετο) is another aorist tense verb is another “prophetic past” pointing to a future work; Morris, 94.

The promise of a place is fulfilled in the new heaven and new earth, the kingdom of Christ:

If they [Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob] had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” (Heb 11:15–16)

The promise of a pardon is fulfilled in the free justification that is grounded upon the life, death, and resurrection of Christ:

That is why [Abraham’s] faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Rom 4:22–25)

The promise of God’s presence is fulfilled now by the Spirit of Christ who dwells in us (Mt 18:20), but will be fulfilled in God’s personal presence in the everlasting kingdom:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” (Rv 21:3)

The promise, the Abrahamic covenant of grace, finds its fulfillment in Christ, and that fulfillment began with the incarnation of the Son of God within Mary’s womb. That is why her soul magnifies the Lord; that is why her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior.

Does your heart rejoice in these truths? That is the true test of saving faith, of faith that is the operation of God’s Spirit. Beloved, do not rest, do not cease to search the Scriptures, do not cease to pray—to ask, seek, and knock (Mt 7:7–11)—until you know that you have it. Then, and only then, will your soul magnify the Lord, and your spirit rejoice in God your Savior.

Faith Is the Substance of Future Joy

I mentioned in the introduction that this sermon had two aims: (1) to explain *why* Mary's soul magnified the Lord, *why* her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior; and (2) to argue that Mary's joy is not unique, but rather is common to all who know God as Savior in Christ Jesus our Lord. I do not want merely to explain why Mary was happy; I want to invite you into that same happiness, and indeed, to warn you that if you do not enter into her happiness, you will not be saved. For joy is of the essence of faith.

In the introduction, we looked at Matthew 13:44 in order to establish this truth. I could have argued that joy is essential to faith from any number of Scripture passages (Phil 3:7–9 and 2 Cor 4:3–7 come to mind).¹⁶ Here at the conclusion of the sermon, I want to make two qualifying statements. First, I do not mean to suggest that Christian joy is always and equally intense and exuberant. I do not mean to suggest that all of life is an experience like what occurred in Elizabeth's home. That clearly is not the case; it was not the case with Mary. Our joy in Christ ebbs and flows with the various trials and tribulations and temptations of life. In other words, I am not asking whether you *always* know the joy that they knew; I am asking whether you know *something* of the joy that they knew, and I am asking whether this joy is *consistent*, even though it is not *continuous*. So do you know *something* of this joy that is of the essence of saving faith, and is it more or less *consistent* in your life?

Second, though joy in Christ ebbs and flows with the various trials, tribulations, and temptations of life, yet there is no necessary correlation between our joy in Christ and the absence or presence of trials, tribulations, and temptations. I say this because of Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 is the story of one saint after another enduring trials, tribulations, and temptations by faith in future joy. Let me give you just three quick examples. Look at Moses:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. (Heb 11:23–26)

¹⁶ John Piper spends a chapter on each of these passages arguing the same point; Piper, *What Is Saving Faith*, 149–54 (Phil 3:7–9), 155–59 (2 Cor 4:3–7).

By faith in a future reward, Moses faithfully endured present suffering. Or look at the martyrs:

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. (Heb 11:35)

By faith, these martyrs persevered unto death and so received the crown of life. Or look at Jesus

*the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.
(Heb 12:2–3)*

In every one of those situations (not to mention the rest of the faithful saints in Hebrews 11) they persevered through trials, tribulations, and temptations by hoping in future joy. Now, here is the question: is that hoped-for joy only future, or is it experienced by faith even now? Look with me at Hebrews 11:1. What is this faith that sustained these saints?

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
(Heb 11:1)*

The older versions translated that verse better. Faith is not merely the “assurance” of things hoped for; faith is the “substance” (ὑπόστασις) of things hoped for.¹⁷ John Piper writes in his book *What Is Saving Faith?* that faith “is the present experience of the future realities that God has promised, especially the glory and worth of Christ. In saving faith, future realities become real in the sense that they are spiritually ‘tasted’ (1 Pet. 2:3). They are ‘seen’ by the eyes of the heart (Eph. 1:18).”¹⁸ Faith “tastes” and “sees” the joy of possessing the treasure of Christ in the present, even before we actually acquire that reality in the future; and faith does so in spite of the losses and crosses that come from being a holy people in an unholy world. Do you have this joy? Can you say with Mary, “My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior?”

¹⁷ For a defense of translating ὑπόστασις as “substance,” see Piper, *What Is Saving Faith?*, 113–19.

¹⁸ Piper, *What Is Saving Faith?*, 118. See Piper’s full discussion on the “substance of future joy” on Ibid., 113–19, 167–77.