

Mary's Song of Praise:
My Soul Magnifies the Mighty and Merciful God

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.

Introduction: What Makes for Good Worship Music?

Do you have any favorite worship songs? Any favorite Christmas carols? What makes them your favorites? Sometimes a song becomes a favorite just because it has an infectious melody – it’s catchy. One of the favorite songs in our family right now is “Song of the Saints” by Audio Adrenaline. It is so catchy as to definitely be infectious, and while I love the song, I think I have decided that it’s not really a worship song. Why not? Well, think about the lyrics. Is the song praising God, either for who He is or what He has done? Not really. It’s focused much more on praising the song of the saints than it is on praising God. That would make it kind of a praise song praising praise songs.

Some of our favorite Christmas carols, even the ones focused on the birth of Jesus, are vague and unclear, sometimes due to their age. The chorus of “What Child is This?” calls us to “Haste, haste to bring Him laud.” Do we know what laud is or how we would bring it to Jesus? Well, laud is an older English term for praise, which makes “What Child is This?” a wonderful call to worship.

Well, so far the only thing you’ve probably learned is that thinking too much about song lyrics can potentially ruin a perfectly good song. You’re probably also thinking that I’m one of those

guys who insists on analyzing movies for their messages instead of just enjoying them – and you’re right, I do. But for me thinking and analyzing doesn’t ruin music or movies for me; it actually helps me enjoy them more deeply. But I freely admit that I’m strange.

One of my all-time favorite Christmas songs is our text today, though I’ve only heard Bach’s version sung, which is in Latin. This song of praise that erupts from Mary’s lips as she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth is one of the most beautiful, rich, theologically insightful and meaningful songs of praise ever written. This is what truly excellent worship songs should be, a focus on the wonderful character of God and offering praise to Him for who He is and what He has done.

This is now the third time I’ve preached a Christmas message on this text, as I preached it in 2009 at New Covenant, in 2010 at Faith PCA in Cheraw, SC and now in 2016 here in Forest Hill. Though I’ve preached this same text three times now, I have never preached the same sermon on it. I honestly think I could probably preach this text every December for the rest of my life and never preach the same exact sermon, not because I’m a skilled preacher but because this text is just so wonderfully profound and rich.

A. What Mary Sings About Herself, vv. 46-49

I. My Soul Magnifies the Lord

Traditionally, this song is known as the “Magnificat,” which comes from the first word in the Latin version of Mary’s Song. In Latin, the opening line is “Magnificat anima mea Dominum” – literally “Magnifies my soul the Lord” or “My soul magnifies the Lord.” But you might wonder about this opening line, especially if you’re prone to over-analyzing like I am, “How can Mary’s soul magnify the Lord?” And I could say, “Stop over-analyzing the song; you’ll ruin it. Just enjoy it,” but I won’t say that.

We can magnify something in two different ways. A magnifying glass takes something really small and makes it appear bigger so you can see the details more clearly. But we can also magnify something by taking something really big that is really far away and making it appear bigger and so to bring it closer so we can begin to get a sense of how large and detailed it is. When we magnify God, it is in this second sense. In truth, God is neither very small nor very far away from us, but He can seem distant, irrelevant to our lives, difficult to see, discern or know.

There a wonderful parallel to this expression in Psalm 34, written by David, which opens:

*I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the LORD;*

*let the humble hear and be glad.
Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!*

If you lay these two songs of praise next to each other, you have David issuing a call to worship: “Oh, magnify the LORD with me,” and his great-great-great-great-great granddaughter a thousand years later answering, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

If Mary’s song of praise overall sounds a lot like many of David’s songs of praise, that’s not a coincidence. You can find parallel expressions of praise in the Psalms for almost every line of the Magnificat, drawn from numerous different psalms. Jewish children in Mary’s day were raised on the Scriptures, memorizing large sections of Scripture from an early age, especially the psalms, which were not only memorized but were prayed and sung daily.

The lesson for us is clear: If we want our souls to magnify the Lord like Mary, we need to feed our souls on a steady diet of God’s word on a daily basis from an early age. What we put in over time will overflow from our lips.

2. He Has Looked on the Humble Estate of His Servant

Mary’s soul magnifies the Lord because He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. Mary’s humility and gratitude are clear and sincere. She sees herself as lowly, unworthy, even vile. She is not claiming her merits or boasting in her righteousness. On the contrary, her ability to magnify God and to rejoice in Him comes directly from her low view of herself which causes her to be moved with deep gratitude by God’s favor shown to her.

We cannot be truly grateful unless we see ourselves as we truly are, humble, low, unworthy and even vile. Only when will God’s grace be seen for the undeserved and wonderfully condescending favor and kindness that it is.

3. All Generations Will Call Me Blessed

Mary’s song erupts from her lips in response to Elizabeth’s greeting, ““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?” Mary realizes the implications of her role as the mother of the Son of God. What could easily be seen as an inconvenient pregnancy that is bringing Mary embarrassment and the possibility of rejection by Joseph is instead seen for the wonderful blessing of God’s favor. Mary knows that “from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

I don’t think Mary has in mind that many will call her “the Blessed Virgin Mary” or “the mother of God” or “the Queen of heaven.” She is not talking about a particular kind of veneration she will receive, but rather that people will celebrate how blessed, how fortunate, how favored by God she is. Greek has two words for “blessed” – one which means well of, fortunate, even

“lucky” or favored. The other word means literally “spoken well of” or “praised.” Mary uses the first word, not the second: All generations will call me blessed or count me as happy or consider me favored. There is certainly no hint in this song that Mary is drawing attention to herself as particularly worthy or meritorious or deserving veneration or honor. Her song has quite the opposite focus: She is magnifying the Lord.

4. He Who is Mighty Has Done Great Things for Me

The last thing Mary says about herself makes clear why people will call her blessed? It is because “he who is mighty has done great things for me.” God is the mighty one, the strong and powerful one, who has done great things for Mary. Mary has not done anything great for God; He has done great things for her.

B. What Mary Sings About Her God, vv. 49-56

I. Holy is His Name

As Mary sings about “He Who is mighty,” her song turns from a consideration of how good God has been to her personally to how wonderful God is Himself and what He does for His people in the world generally. The first attribute of “He who is mighty” that she celebrates is God’s holiness: “and holy is His name.”

God’s name is holy because holiness is the chief and core attribute of God. The four living creatures around His throne cover themselves with their wings in the presence of His radiance as they cry out day and night, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.” “Holy is His name” because His holiness defines all of His other characteristics: His love is a holy love. His mercy is a holy mercy. His might is a holy might. His sovereignty over the affairs of the world is a holy sovereignty.

God’s holiness describes two things mainly, His transcendence and His purity, both of which are absolute, which is why God is not just holy, but holy, holy, holy. His transcendence means that God is set apart, above and beyond, in a category all by Himself. He cannot be rightly compared to anyone else, as He is utterly unique. He cannot be subject to anyone or anything else because He is utterly supreme. God is also absolutely pure, so pure that He is radiant. Not only is there no stain on God’s character, there is not even the shadow of a stain, not even the hint of any flaw or defect of any kind. Holy is His name!

2. His Mercy is for Those Who Fear Him

Thankfully, He who is mighty, whose name is holy, is also merciful. And because His mercy is a holy mercy, His mercy is for those who fear Him.

Psalm 103:11-13 says,

*“For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
 as far as the east is from the west,
 so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
 As a father shows compassion to his children,
 so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.” (ESV)*

This is not a denial of the truth that God is loving and kind on a daily basis to believers and unbelievers. Jesus taught, in Matthew 5:43-45, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”*

But while God is kind to all, *“His mercy is for those who fear Him,”* meaning that God’s covenant love and faithfulness, His forgiveness and saving mercy, His fatherly care and boundless grace, is reserved for those who are His, for those who love and fear Him.

A father may love many other children besides his own, but he does not love them in the same way that he loves his own. His mercy toward those who are not his children will have limits, will have boundaries, but not for his own children. He may have to discipline, correct, rebuke and allow his children to suffer consequences – and if he’s a good dad he’ll do all of these things – but he will never stop loving and forgiving his children. He will always have compassion on them.

Also notice that God’s covenant mercies are generational, *“from generation to generation.”* Nowhere is that more clearly seen than in the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke and here in this stirring Psalm-like song of praise from this daughter of Israel hundreds of years and many generations after the Psalms were written.

3. He Has Shown Strength with His Arm

Not only has God extended mercy to those who fear Him, He has also shown strength with His arm. God is tender in compassion and strong in power, forgiving and comforting His own and showing His power to the world. We would be absolutely lost and without hope if God were not both merciful and strong, both tender in His compassion and awesome in His power. We need the goodness of God to extend salvation to us and we need the greatness of God to secure and safeguard our salvation in the face of fierce opposition.

4. He Has Brought Down . . . And Exalted

But God’s arm is not just strong: It is absolutely sovereign, ruling over the lives and affairs people:

*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.*

Those who think they are great and exalt themselves in their own thinking God scatters and brings down. He dethrones the mighty and raises up the humble. He feeds the hungry and sends the rich away empty.

Now if we misunderstand what Mary is saying here, we can get confused very easily. Obviously, we can look around us and see that the proud are not often scattered, the rich seem to keep getting richer and the poor often do go hungry. It doesn't look like God is sovereignly ordering things in this world according to justice. But we need to look deeper.

Mary's own situation is helpful. She was a poor girl from a backwater town in a far corner of the Roman Empire. In the estimation of the world, she didn't matter at all. Becoming the mother of the Son of God didn't really seem to help her situation any either. No one really believed that she was a virgin and that her son was directly from God as a miracle. Honestly, would you believe a young woman who told you that today? Joseph nearly divorced and disowned her. They stayed in Bethlehem and then in Egypt for years while Jesus was a young boy, in part to avoid the gossips and the slanderers.

Jesus Himself was not wealthy or powerful. He lived a semi-nomadic, semi-homeless life during His earthly ministry, relying on the kindness of others and being buried in a borrowed tomb at His death. Yet no one in the first century was more important or more favored by God than this poor woman and her poor, misunderstood, rejected Son. Today, Mary is better known and better thought of than any of the emperors of Rome or the kings who sat in Jerusalem, while Jesus is worshiped and adored by millions upon millions in every corner of the world.

More important than earthly fame, however, is the eternal and spiritual blessing of God. This life is passing and the treasures of this world are fading. Eternity is what matters. God's blessings are what truly lasts. The child of God who dies penniless and homeless and friendless in this world is infinitely more blessed and better off than the richest oil magnate in Saudi Arabia who does not know the mercy of God which is for those who fear Him. The celebrity millionaire who is mourned by millions but does not know the forgiveness and salvation of God dies truly alone and without hope, forever.

In the end, there will be no doubt of God's absolute sovereignty nor of His holy, sovereign goodness to His own.

5. He Has Helped . . . In Remembrance . . . As He Spoke

Ultimately, God's holy and sovereign goodness to His people is seen in the gift of His Son, which Mary celebrates when she sings:

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’s gift of His Son was not just some random act of divine kindness, as the famous bumper sticker slogan, “Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.” God is neither random nor senseless nor should we be. God’s help extended to His people in His Son was “in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Mary is remembering God’s covenant promises, made to Abraham first in Genesis 12, 15 and 22, that God would bless Abraham and his offspring and that He would, in fact, bless all of the nations of the world through Abraham and his offspring. God renewed His covenant promises of blessing and favor to Isaac and Jacob.

Hundreds of years later, He made covenant promises to King David in 2 Samuel 7, promising to build his house and to establish his throne forever, placing one of David’s descendants on the throne of God’s kingdom to rule there forever. Many people hoped this would be Solomon, but it would be another thousand years before God would send the eternal king.

Mary sings her praise to God, knowing that He has finally fulfilled these promises. He has remembered His mercy. He has kept His word.

Jesus is not just the Son of God, the offspring of the virgin’s womb. He is the answer to the centuries-old longing of God’s people, the keeping of God’s centuries-old promises, the eternal blessing and the personal embodiment of mercy for God’s people forever! As Jesus sits exalted on the throne over God’s kingdom at God’s right hand, God is still keeping His promise, still extending His mercy, still showing forth His faithfulness.

Are we still singing His praise like Mary? Are we filled with humble gratitude, knowing how the Lord has looked upon our lowly estate, our humble and undeserving and even vile condition and has had mercy on us? Are we praising the One who is mighty for the great things He has done for us? Are we worshiping His holy name, rejoicing in the strength of His arm, resting in His mercy toward those who fear Him? Are we remembering and retelling and rejoicing in His covenant promises kept and our deepest needs met? Are we going to Him with our hungry souls, to be filled with the good things He alone can give? Are we trusting in Him to protect, provide, forgive and bless, according to His holy and sovereign goodness?

Mary gives us a wonderful example of true praise for this Christmas season and always. Let’s learn to sing along with her!