

The Magnificat

Luke 1:46-55

With Study Questions

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Preface:

Mary and Elizabeth

The angel Gabriel had appeared to Zacharias to prophecy the birth of his son (even though his wife, Elizabeth was well advanced in years), who would be John the Baptist. Gabriel also appeared to Mary and informed her she would give birth to the Savior (even though she had not known a man). Mary would visit Elizabeth when both were with child. The child of Elizabeth would leap in her womb. Elizabeth would confirm what the angel had said. The following is Mary's response. This morning we will examine Mary's response and full expression of the knowledge of her role in God's work of redemption.

A Refined Exuberance

It is worth noting that Mary's song, though far from dispassionate, is full of allusions to the Old Testament. Quotes from Hannah (1 Samuel 1,2), the Psalms, Isaiah, and more, flow from this young woman's lips. The Magnificat (which is the first word in the hymn in the latin version: *Magnificat anima mea Dominium*, meaning, 'My soul magnifies the Lord')¹ is a wonderful example of passion tempered and directed by truth. This is not the sentimental rambling of a young woman. It is rather like a talented artist who has refined his skill with a study of anatomy or architecture.

Four Parts

We will also see four unique aspects of her song. The first addresses God's blessings toward her. The second is God's blessings from generation to generation. The third is God's judgment on the proud. Fourth is Mary's allusion to the covenant keeping God.

I. Personal

“And Mary said: “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. 48 For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. 49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name” (Luke 1:46-49).

¹ William, Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Baker Book House, 1978), p. 101.

A Unique Birth

Mary's response is, no doubt reminiscent, if not taken, from Hannah who also had a miraculous birth of the prophet Samuel. Mary would have been aware of the Sarah's birth of Isaac and now Elizabeth's conception of John the Baptist. But Mary's was unique. In one respect it was unique because she, unlike the others, was not barren. She had not yet known a man. It was unique because the goal of the others was to foreshadow and make the way for her child whose name would be Jesus, for He would save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

Magnifying God

Her soul magnifies the Lord. As the Psalmist records,

“I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise *shall continually be* in my mouth. My soul shall make its boast in the LORD; The humble shall hear *of it* and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together” (Psalm 34:1-3).

God had extolled Mary, and every generation would call her blessed. Yet Mary would not magnify herself, but she rather acknowledges her lowly estate, and magnifies the Lord.

“But on this *one* will I look: On *him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word*” (Isaiah 66:1,2).

Soul and Spirit

Mary's soul would magnify the Lord and her spirit would rejoice in her God, her Savior. Two things to note here:

Mary mentioning soul and spirit is thought by some to simply be a poetic repetition of the same faculty. The distinction between soul and spirit, according to this view, should not be made.² Others believe the spirit ought to be taken for understanding and the soul for the seat of affection.³ I wouldn't force the issue at this point. One thing is clear no matter how we slice up the language—both understanding and affection are contained in Mary's praise. This is something that could only be achieved by one who is well catechized in heart and mind. What I mean by this is a knowledge of the promises of God and a joyful expectation of the fulfillment of those promises. Such should be the goal of every believer.

² Hendriksen would hold this view, p. 103.

³ John Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries, Harmony of the Gospel (Baker Book House), p. 53

Savior

Secondly, Mary refers to her Savior. Although this reference to salvation may be applied to salvation from bondage, obscurity or other earthly predicaments, it seems that the context is salvation from sins (Matthew 1:21). This is clearly problematic for the Roman Catholic view of a sinless Mary. Mary rejoiced in being saved from her sins, as should we.

Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; For YAH, the LORD, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation.”²³Therefore with joy you will draw water From the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:2,3).

And there is no other God besides Me, A just God and a Savior; There is none besides Me. ²²“Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:21,22).

Personal and Corporate

This stanza ends with a very personal outburst. **“For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name.”** From generation to generation there seems to be two dangers: One is an over-emphasis of our personal relationship to the exclusion of a corporate relationship (this perhaps being the dominant error among today’s evangelicals). People feel perfectly comfortable in their Christianity apart from any connection with the body of Christ. This is clearly unbiblical.

The other is an over-emphasis of our corporate relationship to the exclusion of a personal relationship. We see this among many Roman Catholics who view the church as their mediator rather than Christ. We also see this among Protestants, who might be faithful in church attendance, but don’t exhibit the fruit of one who has Christ as Savior and Lord.

Mary is excited about what God has done for her individually, but quickly moves to the corporate blessings as well.

II. Corporate

“And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation” (Luke 1:50).

Mary’s excitement is further established when she sees herself as part of the tapestry of God’s everlasting covenant. A covenant Mary was no doubt familiar with as one given to Abraham.

“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you” (Genesis 17:7).

Bittersweet

There should be an excitement in the life of the Christian, not only in what God has done for us, but in what God is doing in history from generation to generation. Mary’s life was to be filled with difficulty and heartache. But her difficulty and heartache would be major players in God’s plan of redemption throughout history. She would watch her Son be crucified. But she would also watch the Savior of the world be crucified. It was bitter and sweet. Honey on the tongue and sour in the stomach. But the true glory can only be appreciated from one who would have a protracted view of time. We mustn’t be overly concerned with the apparent failures and victories of our singular generation. We must know that God has a plan of mercy for all generations.

Mercy

But even though God’s goodness is known, to a certain extent, to all men, the mercy of which Mary sings is extended to a specific group. It is extended to those who fear Him. Matthew Henry states,

“It has been a common observation that God in his providence puts contempt upon the haughty and honour upon the humble.”⁴

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). No man who views God as a debtor or a contemporary will find favor in His sight. God is to be feared. And He will incline His ear to those who in humility of faith, call to Him for deliverance. Mary will now proclaim the judgment which comes to those who have no fear of God in their eyes, those who trust in the strength of their own arms and minds.

III. Judgment

“He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:51-53).

⁴ Matthew Henry, *The Matthew Henry Commentary* (Zondervan, reprinted 1960), p. 1413.

Scattering the Proud

Interesting that such a young girl would have such a broad world view. God scatters those who are proud in the imagination of their own hearts. Who Mary likely has in mind are people in power who trust in their own innovations for goals and methods, rather than the goals and methods revealed by God's word. It seems that our very best political candidates have lost sight of what it means to govern in such a way as to defer to the only wise God and Savior. What Mary seems to be saying is, "that in the course of history God's mighty power has repeatedly punished these arrogant people."⁵

Rich Yet Poor

God exalts the lowly. He fills the hungry with good things (unlike the bad things the ungodly seek to fill us with). And the rich he sends away empty. This is not to say that it is inherently evil to be rich. But when one thinks their riches to be satisfactory we must consider the words of Jesus Himself in a letter to the church at Laodicea.

"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— 18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see" (Revelation 3:17,18).

In short, as Matthew Henry states, **"They come full of self, and are sent away empty of Christ."**⁶ Peter recorded, and as Mary knew that men ought to, **"Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God"** (1 Peter 5:6). For God, as revealed in Daniel, **"changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings"** (Daniel 2:21).

How well acquainted Mary must have been with Psalm 2.

"Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? ² The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying,³ "Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us." ⁴ He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The LORD

⁵ William, Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Baker Book House, 1978), p. 107.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *The Matthew Henry Commentary* (Zondervan, reprinted 1960), p. 1414.

shall hold them in derision.⁵ Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure:⁶ “Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.”⁷ “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.⁸ Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession.⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’ ”¹⁰ Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth.¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling.¹² Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him” (Psalm 2:1-12).

It would be the Son of Mary who would inherit the nations and break the ungodly with a rod of iron. Mary rejoiced in what had been done for her and what would be done through history.

IV. Covenant Keeping

“He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever” (Luke 1:54,55).

Jews or Gentiles?

But I thought this was for Christians! This passage, and so many like it, seem to exclude the gentiles. When I read the New Testament—when I read the words of Mary, am I excluded from being in the chorus of her song? We serve and covenant making, covenant keeping God. It seems the covenant is with Israel, and Abraham and his seed. What about me? What about the church? What about those who would believe in the very Son Mary held within her body? Here is where much of modern Christendom has been robbed. We are made to think and to feel as if the promise is for others, when the Scriptures declare it to be for us. As Paul writes,

“And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

The promise made to Abraham was that through Him all the families of the world would be blessed. The Old Testament was always universal in its final aim. And the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) are the recipients of the precious promises contained in the person and work of the blessed Savior.

The King Reigns

Two thousand years have come and gone since Mary sang her song—since the King was born. From the twelve who traveled by foot through the middle east with her Son in His three-year-long ministry we now have over one billion who have taken His name upon themselves. Let us celebrate the King of kings and the Lord of lords, for truly He is the ruler of the kings of the earth (Revelation 1:5).

Questions for Study

1. What is meant by the latin term 'magnificat'?
2. Explain the thought and passion behind this song.
3. What are the four parts we see in this song?
4. What is Mary's initial response to God's favor in her life?
5. Discuss the terms soul and spirit.
6. In what respect is does Mary need a Savior? How does this comport with the Roman Catholic view of Mary?
7. What are the strengths and dangers of corporate and personal relationships with God?
8. To whom does God extend mercy?
9. What does God do to the proud?
10. How can one be rich yet poor?
11. Who is the Israel of God?
12. In what respect is Jesus the King of kings?