

Magnificent! – Lessons from Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-54

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

Call to Worship

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we worship You through Christ the newborn King. We come in the name and by the merit of the Lord Jesus Christ to pour our prayers and praises out before the throne of grace. We ask that You would meet with us, that You would receive our worship, that You would hear our prayers and answer them. We ask that you would teach us by your word that You would speak to us by Your word as it is read and proclaimed. And we pray that You would make our hearts to be open to that word, to respond to that word. We acknowledge that we are sinners, we deserve condemnation and destruction, and yet in Your mercy through Jesus Christ in His incarnation, in His life, in His ministry, in His death, in His resurrection and ascension is for us, and because He has been for us, we are now no longer aliens and strangers but sons and daughters, citizens of Your promised kingdom and family. And we praise You for this, O God. We ask that You would receive then our worship, and enable it by Spirit and truth. This we ask in Jesus' name.

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Luke, chapter 1, the 46th verse. We're working through this greatest story ever told this month, the stories immediately prior to and about the birth of Jesus Christ recorded in Luke chapters 1 and 2, and there are four particular passages that we're looking at. Derek has already introduced us to the passage in which the angel encounters Mary and tells her of the news of the Savior whom she is bearing, and today we will turn to Luke 1:46-56 and look at the song which Mary sings upon the greeting that she receives from Elizabeth, her cousin, when she goes to visit her. So let's hear God's word in Luke chapter 1 beginning in verse 46.

And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, for He has had regard for the humble state of His bond slave; for behold from this time on all generations will count me blessed. For the mighty one has done great things for me; and holy is His name. And His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him, He has done mighty deeds with his arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry

with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed. He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever." And Mary stayed with her about three months, and then returned to her home." Amen.

This is God's word. May He add his blessing to it. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Lord and our God, we are familiar with this passage of Scripture. Some of us have heard it sung or read literally hundreds of times. We ask that our over familiarity with it, our attachment to it via sentimentality would not detract from the force and power and truth of this passage. Indeed, we ask that you would enable us to grasp it, to understand it, and to embrace its truth for our lives. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

We are familiar with the outline and even the details of the story of Jesus' birth. And in the first message in this series Derek drew attention to some of the aspects of personal difficulty that would have been involved for Mary in being the bearer of the Christ child. To us it's a beautiful story. For them it was a dangerous story. To us it is an encouraging story, and it was to her as well. But it was also a story that could have been discouraging for just as there was glory in the message that the angels brought, there was difficulty and trial, there was even isolation and danger for Mary being the bearer of the Christ child. And we'll consider some of the reasons again this morning why that was the case.

But it's important for us to remember that when we see Mary pouring out this song of thanksgiving to God, we may think that this was a natural thing. After all the Messiah had been announced. The hope of Israel had been announced. Mary had the role of being the bearer of that hope of Israel into the world. Why wouldn't she be thankful? Why wouldn't she be happy? Well, of course, those are very good and legitimate reasons for her to be happy. But along with this, not only in her personal situation but also in the national situation, there were reasons to be discouraged. There were even reasons to despair. And yet, in the face of those circumstances, Mary pours out a song of praise to God. And there is much that we can learn from that for our own circumstances.

This passage, I want to suggest to you, points us to at least five areas of growth for our own personal lives as we face the difficulties and trials of life in a fallen world. I want to suggest that this passage points us to five areas in which we ourselves need strengthening. We can learn from Mary's song about these areas.

I. Mary models for us in her song of praise a mind saturated in the Scriptures.

The first one is this; and that is, the area of knowing Scripture. In verses 46 through 55 as Mary pours out this song spontaneously in response to something that Elizabeth had said to her, and you'll see that something if you allow your eyes to look at verse 43, "How has it happened to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Elizabeth is acknowledging something to Mary that the angel had already told to Mary. But the thought of it overwhelms Mary. And again she's moved to praise God about the announcement that the angel has made to her. And so she pours out this song of praise, but when she does it, she does it with phrase after phrase of Scripture. In other words, Mary shows us that she knows Scripture as she sings this song. And she models for us in her song of praise a mind that is saturated with the Scriptures. And we ourselves need to grow in our acquaintance with the Scripture.

Now look at some of the allusions that Mary gives in this song. She alludes to Psalm 103, and to Psalm 22, and to Psalm 44, and to Psalm 89, and to Psalm 98, and to Psalm 147, and to Psalm 25. Of course, you're well aware that she also alludes in this song to Hannah's song, the song that Hannah sang when God granted her a child way back in I Samuel chapter 2, verses 2 through 10. But Mary also uses phrases in this song from the book of I Samuel, 2nd Samuel, Isaiah and Job. In other words, Mary pillages the Scriptures to come up with the words of praise to give back to God for the marvelous thing that He has done for her. Obviously the educators of Mary's day were not afflicted with memorization phobia, because someone along the line had encouraged Mary to memorize Scripture, and so when her hour of need came, when she needed to find the words to say to express her heart of joy and thankfulness to the sovereign God who was using her as a powerful and unique instrument in the efforts to bring about the accomplishment of redemption, she was able to go to the Scripture and pray and sing and thank God through those Scriptures. Her memory was stored with Scripture. She was familiar, whether it was by reading or by hearing, with the Old Testament. And so, when out of the abundance of her heart, she spoke, her mouth was filled with the language of Scripture. And she expressed her feelings in the language of Scripture.

Think of it, friends. The same Scripture which helped her cope with the announcement of the angel to her, as glorious as that was, Mary knew that being the bearer of the Christ child was going to come with dangers. One of the first dangers that she was going to face was the danger of ostracism. She was in a culture and in a religion where unwed mothers were not looked upon kindly. She was going to face, perhaps, the loss of her husband. We know from the other gospels that Joseph seriously considered divorcing her because he assumed that she had been unfaithful to him. Mary was facing the danger of being cut off from her immediate family, and who knows what other personal and physical dangers. And yet her knowledge of Scripture enabled her to help believe this message that this angel had announced to her. And now, that same knowledge of the Scripture was helping her respond in faith and even in rejoicing with thanksgiving at the call that God had given to her life. And Mary is an example to

us. She's modeling for us in her song of praise a mind saturated with Scriptures, and indeed, love for the word of God is one of the great evidences of a work of grace in the heart.

Those in whom God's grace resides love the word of God's grace. They think about the word of God's grace. They read and hear the word of God's grace. They like to hear it read. They like to read it themselves. They like to hear it proclaimed and preached and explained. They like to study it, and they love to memorize it. And you see this in Mary. Love for the word of God is one of the great evidences of a work of grace in the heart. The Bible, you see, should be our book of books. Whatever book we love. Whatever books we love. Whatever books we study, the Bible should be our book of books. What an impact that would make on our prayers and our lives. Think, if at those traumatic times, or those joyful times of life, if your mind was stored with a ready knowledge of Scripture, you would have all the words that you would need to render up prayers and intercessions and petitions and thanksgivings and adorations to God. You know what the key to prayer is? It's praying Scripture. And if the key to prayer is praying Scripture, in which you give back to God the promises that he has made to you, and you call on Him to answer the promises that He has already made, well then the key to prayer is knowing Scripture.

How do you react when you're on autopilot? You know, the crisis has come, and you can't even think. You're having to rely on instinct. How do you do when you are on autopilot? Well, Mary was in one of those instances. I mean, when an angel shows up and tells you that you are going to bear the Messiah, there's not a whole lot of processing that's going to go on at that point. And when Elizabeth greets you at the door, and she says, "You know, I'm not worthy to be in the presence of the mother of my Lord," how do you respond to that? In those moments in which you are on autopilot how do you respond? Well, a Scripture-saturated mind reacts in a scriptural way, and that's exactly what we see Mary doing.

I had the privilege of listening to Jim Dobson's radio interview of Lisa Beamer. It was replayed last night. And Lisa Beamer had an opportunity to learn what she did on autopilot on September, 11, 2001, when the call came that her husband, Todd, was on the flight that had crashed in Pennsylvania. And she was now a single mom with children to raise on her own, and one who was not yet born. And in that day she was able to draw upon faith, certainly upon friends, but especially upon Scripture. How do you react when you're on autopilot? That question scares me a little when I ask it of myself. I wonder how I'll do in those moments of trial, surprise, anxiety, when circumstances turn for the worst. Mary shows us what a mind saturated with the Scripture does in those moments when we're shocked. We don't have time to collect ourselves, but we blurt out the first things that have been trained in the depth of our soul through the reading and hearing and meditating upon of the word of God. So we ourselves need to grow in our acquaintance with Scripture, and Mary models for us in her song of praise, a

mind that is saturated with Scripture. That's the first thing that I want you to see here.

II. Mary models for us in her song of praise a heart of humility.

The second thing is this, and you'll see it especially in verses 46 through 48, and that is the humility of Mary in this song. Mary models for us in her song a heart of humility. She has been given an awesome and honorable position. She is the Messiah-bearer. For hundreds of years Israel has been waiting for the coming of Messiah. Since the days of Abraham and before stretching back all the way to the days of Adam, Israel has been waiting for the seed that would crush the head of the serpent. And now the angel has said to Mary, and now Elizabeth has acknowledged to Mary that what the angel said is true, that Mary is the be the Messiah-bearer. Her greatest moment of calling has now been revealed to her. The central purpose of her life and existence has now been revealed to her, and it is a position of significant influence and even status in the redemptive work of God. And her response is humility. And I want you to notice two things about what she says.

First of all she acknowledges herself as a sinner. Look at what she says in verse 47, "My Spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." Mary was a sinner, too. Mary needed a Savior. And she responds to this announcement that she is going to be the instrument to bring into the world the Savior of the world by acknowledging that she needs that Savior. But not only this, she acknowledges that she is of lowly estate. She is humble. Look at what she says in verse 48, "For He has regard for the humble state of His bondservant." She calls herself a willing, permanent servant of the Lord. Now she had every temptation in that moment to bask in the pride of that position. And yet her humility shows through. And in that she is an example to us, a model to us of such holy humility. One old divine has said, "A man has just as much Christianity as he has humility."

Humility is the highest grace that can adorn the Christian character. And it is a grace that is to be present in every converted person. True gospel humility is the supreme evidence of grace in the heart. But it's tested, my friends. It's tested when we feel a call to serve and we're treated like servants, it tests our humility. When we're given a position of responsibility and even influence and power, it tests our humility. When we are seeking to love other Christians and we're treated badly by them, even in our desire to do them good, it tests our humility. And Mary comes through with flying colors and is an example to us of the kind of gospel humility that is the supreme evidence of grace in the heart. So we see here an emphasis on the importance of knowing the scriptures; we also see an emphasis on humility in this song.

III. Mary models for us in her song of praise an attitude of thankfulness.

But I also want you to see the thankfulness of this song. Look at verses 46 through 49 especially. Over and over phrases of thanksgiving are lifted up to God. "My soul exalts the Lord for He has had regard for the humble estate of His bondservant. For behold from this time on all generations will count me blessed for the mighty one has done great things for me." And it goes on and on. "His mercy is upon generation after generation." "He has done mighty deeds with His arm." "He has exalted those who are humble." "He has filled the hungry with good things." "He has given help to Israel His servant in remembrance of His mercy." Mary's song is filled with thanksgiving, and it models for us an attitude of thankfulness.

Now think about this for a minute, friends. Mary is single, an unwed mother in a religion and culture where that meant ostracism or death; and the nation of Israel is at the very lowest ebb of its existence. In fact, it hasn't been an independent nation for half a millennium. It's been half a millennium since there was a king on the throne of Israel. It's been half a millennium since the voices of the prophets rang out in Jerusalem. The Gentile oppressors of the people of God, the Romans, are occupying the land. There are lots of things, my friend, in Mary's life and in the life of the nation not to be thankful about, but to be discouraged about. And yet Mary's focus is not on those hard circumstances, not on those despairing circumstances, her focus is not on herself, but her focus is on thankfulness to God. And we, too, need to cultivate that kind of a thankful spirit. It's the hallmark of true saints in every age and era and circumstance. J. C. Ryle says, "Let us rise from our beds every morning with a deep conviction that we are debtors and that every day we have more mercies than we deserve."

Mary could have focused on the dangers. I mean, you have to ask yourself, "Why is this woman leaving her nuclear family, and going away for 3 months, far off, with Elizabeth?" We could read a lot into that, as to the family dynamics of this announcement. Perhaps Mary's family had given the same initial reaction to her that Joseph had given to her when she told him the news. For whatever reason, she goes off for 3 months in the middle of this pregnancy, far away to be with this cousin. And she had many things to have feared or been discouraged about. And yet she is filled with thanksgiving.

True gospel thankfulness is always a matter of faith over circumstance. It is a matter of seeing our circumstances through the eyes of faith. Who is it? Is it the evangelist E. V. Hill who says that since he's been a young boy, ever since he was converted, the first thing he thinks when he wakes up, his head's on the pillow in the morning is, "Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus. Every circumstance, thank you Jesus" is the response. This is Mary's response in a very difficult situation. She models for us in her song of praise an attitude of thankfulness.

IV. Mary models for us in her song of praise the importance of an experiential acquaintance with God's past dealings with His people.

Then fourthly I want you to see this. Mary makes much of God's past dealings with His people. For Mary, the way that God has dealt with His people in the past is a clue to how God is going to deal with her. As she looks back at the way the Lord has surprised His people with grace, and has surprised those who are powerful and yet in opposition to Him with derision and with condemnation, so also she may expect the Lord to surprise her with grace and to deal with her in such a way. Mary possessed an experiential knowledge of the way that God had dealt with His people in the past, and Mary models for us in her song of praise the importance of having an experiential acquaintance with God's past dealing with His people. It's one of the great ways that we cope with the hard circumstances in our own lives.

That's why it's important to care about Bible history and church history; to be able to look back and see the way that God has dealt with His people in the past, how He's spoken to them, how He's rescued them, how He has aided them, what He has taught them. That's why we need to become students of the school of God's providence. And the only way we can do that is to become students of what He's done for His people in history, and what He's done for His people in the Bible.

And Mary's song is filled with the recounting of this. Look at verse 50. "His mercy is upon generation after generation." "He has done mighty deeds with his arm." "He's scattered those who were proud." "He's brought down rulers." "He's exalted the humble." "He's filled the hungry." "He's sent away the rich empty handed." "He's helped Israel His servant." "He's spoken to our fathers." Mary knows that story. And it's not just that that story is her story. It's that she learns from how God dealt with Abraham; how God dealt with Israel; how God dealt with His people from generation to generation; and it helps her know how to expect God to deal with her. Here she is, a woman very easily isolated and vulnerable, but she's going to be confident in God. Why? Because she's seen God in the past do what? Exalt the humble and humble the exalted. So she doesn't care whose against her. Because the God who humbles the exalted and exalts the humble is on her humble side. And so Mary not only learns from that story, and sees it as her own story, but she takes it to inform how God is going to deal with her. We learn from that story, friends, how to expect how God will deal with us. And that enables us to play the part that he calls each of us to play in our own callings.

V. Mary models for us in her song of praise a personal trust in the covenant promises of God.

Fifth, if you look at verses 54 and 55, you'll see something very important about Bible promises in this song of Mary. Mary models for us in this song of praise a personal trust in the covenant promises of God. What's the significance of what

Mary says in verses 54 and 55? "He has given help to Israel His servant in remembrance of His mercy as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants forever." What's Mary talking about? She's talking about the covenant of God with Abraham. She's talking about the promises that God made to Abraham in His covenant. She's saying that the promises that God made to Abraham are being fulfilled in the bringing of her son into the world. Mary is linking the promised birth of Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Savior to God's covenant promise to Abraham. She's saying, "Lord, You are fulfilling what you promised to Abraham in Genesis 12, and 15, and 17, You are fulfilling that now in our time and for whatever marvelous reason You have chosen to fulfill that through me."

Mary, you see, knew the Bible promises. She had meditated on the Bible promises. She knew her covenant theology. She knew that God had a single plan that He had been working out for the redemption of His people ever since Genesis 3:15. She knew the words of promise and favor that God had spoken to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and to Moses and to David and to Jeremiah. And so when the time came, and the angel said, "God is doing this through you," she immediately linked the purposes of God revealed to her by the angel to the purposes of God of old which had been promised in covenant with Abraham.

And we, too, need to learn to lay hold of Bible promises. We must grow in our grasp of and faith in these Bible promises. We walk by faith, but faith leans on the promises. And those promises will bear all the weight that we can lay upon them. We may lean on them confidently. The whole focus, you see, of this song of praise is on our covenant God and his covenant faithfulness in fulfilling the promises that he has made to his people. These words are beautiful. They are elegant. The prose is exalted, it's poetic. It's easy to see how this can be made into songs that have been sung for ages. And we attach with this song much sentiment.

But I want you to understand, friends, that Mary is not just speaking sentimentally here. In fact, she's not speaking sentimentally at all. The power of what Mary says in verses 46 through 55 is that this is true. This is true about Jesus the Messiah. This is a claim that God Himself is making about His Son through the inspired author of Scripture. And my friends, Mary just doesn't think it's pretty. It doesn't just move Mary. It doesn't just excite her feelings. Mary believes this. And Mary is confessing her faith in this song.

And however beautiful this song is to you, it won't make any difference to you unless you believe what Mary is saying. Mary is saying that Jesus, the Messiah, is the Savior of the world appointed by God, promised in His covenant with Abraham, and that to believe on Him is to have eternal fellowship with Him.

Do you believe that? Our Westminster Confession of Faith, in chapter 14, verse 2, where it's speaking about saving faith says this: "By faith a Christian believes

to be true whatsoever is revealed in the word for the authority of God Himself speaking therein, and embraces the promise of God for this life and that which is to come." Mary believed the word of the angel. And so when she sang this song, she was singing her faith in God's word. She accepted it as God's, on His authority, and she believed. She believed the promises. She believed the message of the angel. And she believed this promise for this life and the life to come.

And that's the challenge for us today. It doesn't matter how many Christmases we've heard this song, if we've not believed it, if we've not embraced it, if we don't have a personal trust in the God who made these promises, if we don't have a personal faith in the Savior about whom these promises speak, then we do not have fellowship with God. And so I would urge you today, no matter how many times you have heard this song, if you've never trusted in the Savior of this song, if you've never trusted in the God who gave this song, trust Him now, for therein is eternal fellowship now and forever. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, help us to believe these beautiful and familiar words because they exalt Your grace, and they show Your plan, and they reveal the Savior whom to trust is life eternal. Grant them that we would confess him with our lips and with our hearts. For we ask it in His name. Amen.

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