

Text: Luke 1:39-56

Title: Mary, Elizabeth, and Mary's Praise of God

Truth: God is worthy of praise.

Date/Location: Sunday 8/20/2023 (rev. from 1:46-55 Dec 24, 2006) at FBC

Introduction

The OT ended with the dual promise of a forerunner and the coming of the Lord to His temple (Mal. 3-4). This was followed by 400 years of darkness in terms of revelation: silence from God. The heavens were brass; the word of the Lord was exceedingly rare in those days to the point of non-existence as far as we know. But the NT era opens with the light of revelation and the joy of song.

The word *magnificat* means a hymn of song or praise. It is so often attached to the song of Mary when she visited with her cousin Elizabeth that the word almost immediately brings that song to mind. This is because in Latin, the first words of that song are "*Magnificat anima mea Dominum.*" The first word comes down to us from Latin word that means *to magnify* or *to extol*. Although we call it a song, the text does not tell us that Mary sang it.

We have to remember, however, that the Magnificat is not about *Mary*. It is about *God!* The whole point is that Mary is magnifying the Lord. She says in the opening two lines that her soul magnifies the **Lord** and her spirit has rejoiced in **God her Savior**. What she is saying is that with her whole being she extols, praises, glorifies, and worships the Lord and takes joy in her God.

I. Mary Visits Elizabeth

A. The text of Scripture records that Mary traveled to the Judean hill country to visit Elizabeth and share about their respective pregnancies. Who else would Mary be able to confide in about this situation? Remember, Mary was not in Judea at the time. Rather, she was living in Nazareth of Galilee (1:26). This is as much as 50 miles or somewhat more distant. Mary went right away after she saw the angel. How do we know? Remember that the angel told her that it is the sixth month for Elizabeth. And then in 1:56 the text says that she remained with Elizabeth for about three months...and then John the Baptist was born. So the *first* three months of Mary's pregnancy she was with Elizabeth during the *last* three months of hers.

- B. Earlier in 1:36, Gabriel informed Mary that Elizabeth was with child and said, “Elizabeth your relative.” Somehow Mary and Elizabeth were related. How? We know that Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron, the priest from the tribe of Levi. Mary, on the other hand, was a descendant of King David through Heli (Luke 3:23), who was *not* of the tribe of Levi. What is the familial connection? A feasible explanation is that Mary and Elizabeth were related through Mary’s mother, so that Mary was both of Davidic descent *and* Levitical descent. Mary was the genetic connection to the Davidic line; adoptive father Joseph was the legal connection to that line. And so—a new realization for this author—the coming king Jesus also has Levitical genealogy in Him! He will be a priest too—but not the Levitical kind (Heb. 6:20).
- C. The big happening when Mary came to see Elizabeth is what some have called the *quickenings of John the Baptist*. When the sound of Mary’s voice reached Elizabeth, the baby “leaped in her womb.” There was some kind of pre-birth excitement that John unconsciously experienced. The next phrase explains that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, thus indicating the Spirit was upon her in an influential manner.
- This quickening was not just a natural state of things, as if John just happened to start kicking at that time. Verse 15 tells us that he was to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb. That is an unusual work of God. If I may assign a number to it, many of us run on $\frac{1}{2}$ or less (probably $\frac{1}{8}$ or less) of Spirit filling. How about you? How about praying in the morning when you awake: “Lord, I want to be thoroughly influenced by your Spirit today. Keep me close, keep me from sin, keep me in mind of the Word of God...” This is a possible state of existence for you—if you are a follower of Jesus. Trust God for it.
- D. What Elizabeth spoke was directed by God’s Spirit, and it was a blessing upon Mary and her offspring. Elizabeth was overwhelmed, knowing as much as she did of the plan of God. The angel Gabriel had told her husband Zacharias that John was going to be a forerunner, a messenger going ahead of the Lord himself to turn people toward God, as Elijah was prophesied to do. She knew then that another one was coming, and it appears that she figured out that Mary was that virgin prophesied in Isaiah 7:14 carrying the Messiah-Lord. Elizabeth felt so privileged to be in Mary’s presence, so near the Christ-child.
- E. Elizabeth acknowledges the truth that God has placed favor upon Mary and that the word of the Lord would be fulfilled to and through her. But we must keep Elizabeth’s blessing in proper proportion. We fenced in our

view of it in the previous message so that our appreciation for Mary would not reach to the level of veneration or worship. This is because, first of all, Mary was favored by *God*—a favor which God granted her not based on her merit. Second, God favors all believers in Christ with a similar favor (Eph. 1:6). Third, when we read Luke 11:27-28, we see that Jesus deflects praise from His mother specifically toward the larger group of people who obey God’s word. *Those* are the really blessed ones. Mary is one such person, but not the only one.

F. We detect no jealousy in Elizabeth for the privilege that has come upon Mary. She is humble and happily so.

II. Background about Mary

A. Think of Mary’s background— she knew something of the Messiah. In fact, her praise in this passage indicates she was well informed about the Law and prophets. She probably knew Gen. 3:15 about the “seed of the woman.” She knew Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6 that a virgin would give birth to one who was “God with us” and “the mighty God.” It is not a frequent thing that a virgin has a child! She knew just how privileged she was.

B. Mary clearly identifies God as her Savior. This plainly shows that Mary was a sinner just like the rest of humankind who need a Savior. She knew that she fell short of the perfect standard of God. We know that Mary herself was born like any other person—she was *not* immaculately conceived to avoid original sin. No—she had sin like the rest of us. The Bible mentions the normal days of purification after the birth of her son (Luke 2:22) and that she offered a sacrifice (2:24). This all was in accord with Leviticus 12 in the Mosaic Law, where a woman who bears a son was unclean for 7 days (12:2), and then another 33 days (12:4). After that, she had to bring a burnt offering and a sin offering (12:6, 8).¹

C. Mary worships God by expressing who God is and what He has done to help her and others. Mary has good cause to praise God for four reasons:

III. Reason #1: God Has Done Great Things for Mary, vv. 48-49

A. Mary testifies that God looked on her not only from afar, and that He saw with compassion—He considered and cared about her specifically.

B. She readily admitted that she was a lowly person, referring to her social and economic status, no doubt. She also said that she was “His maidservant.” That basically means that she was God’s slave. She had said as much in 1:38 when she told Gabriel that she wanted things to be just the way God wanted them. What a great example she is for us.

- C. And so it should be—because she tells us also in v. 49 that God is mighty and holy. He is all powerful and all perfect.
- D. God’s “regarding” of her low estate resulted in a very honorable place for Mary, namely that all generations would call her blessed. And they do. Taking this rightly, we *ought* to consider Mary to be blessed by God. She was singled out despite her lowly condition for a great service for God. *God* did great things for her. When we consider this, then we can put ourselves in her shoes. We are “lowly” in our estate in sin, God has blessed us with all spiritual blessings if we have believed in His Son. What great things He has done for us, and what a happy condition has come out of a hopeless one.

IV. Reason #2: God has Mercy on Those Who Fear Him, v. 50

- A. Genuinely God-fearing people receive the gift of God’s mercy. For all generations, God has been and will be this way. All people are called upon to fear God—that is to recognize and reverence Him for Who He is. God gives His mercy to these people.
- B. But who is a truly God-fearing person? Many times people say they pray to God or believe in God or thank God for life and health. Yet as true as these things may be, no one can truly be a God-fearer unless they submit themselves to the authority of God in His Word and to His Son the Lord Jesus. John 5:23 tells us “that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.” Today, a God-fearing person must believe in Jesus Christ, else he gives evidence that he does not *truly* fear God.

V. Reason #3: God Exalts the Humble and Opposes the Proud, vv. 51-53

- A. This section is full of verbs that portray God’s actions toward people. He has demonstrated His strength by powerful actions. Some of these actions include the following:
 - 1. Scattered the proud. The proud are those who imagine themselves to be something when they fail to recognize they are nothing. See Dan. 4:37.
 - 2. Put down mighty. God sets up and puts down rulers as He pleases, Rom. 13:1.
 - 3. Exalted the lowly. One of two “positive” statements in this section, one example of which is what God did for Mary. She is world-famous, though she was a nobody.

4. Filled hungry with good things. God delights to give His people what they need. This hunger is the hunger for righteousness (Matt. 5:6).
 5. Sent away rich empty. For instance, the rich young ruler in Matt 19:16-26, who left the Lord without salvation. In material terms, riches are fleeting (James 5:2-3).
- B. All this God did! Note the general idea of fellowship with God. The proud, mighty, and rich are put away from God, while the lowly and hungry are helped (Jer. 9:23-24).ⁱⁱ

V. Reason #4: God Has Helped Israel, vv. 54-55

- A. Reflecting on Gabriel’s announcement that Jesus would be given David’s throne and reign over Israel forever (1:31-33), Mary says that God has helped His servant Israel. Israel’s long-awaited prophesied king was finally on His way.
- B. Note again the word *servant*. It was used before of Mary, now of the entire nation of Israel. Numerous times in the OT God wants the nation of Israel to serve Him.ⁱⁱⁱ In other OT passages, the nation is sometimes called God’s servant.^{iv} Here the word servant is translated from a word that can mean child as well as servant. Exodus 4:23 ties the two notions together—Israel is both God’s son and His servant.
- C. The main point of these verses is that God, through the soon coming birth of the Messiah, was “helping” His servant Israel because He was keeping his promises to Israel. God remembered his mercy to Abraham and the fathers (Isaac, Jacob, the 12 patriarchs, and probably David as well). The promises He spoke to these men were forever. Consider: Exodus 32:13 “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” See also 2 Chron. 20:7, 2 Sam. 7:13, 15-16.
- D. The nation was in rough shape at that time, being under Roman rule as it was (is it all that much better today?) The faithful remnant was looking for help from God, and it was about to be delivered. They counted on God and were not disappointed.

Conclusion

Take a moment to take stock of this fact: There is no self help in the Bible! There is “God help” but no “self help.” It is **God** who helps. It is **God** who raises up the lowly. It is **God** who did great things for young Mary. It is

God who provides mercy to those who fear Him. It is **God** who helps Israel. The saying “God helps those who help themselves” has a wrong focus. Of course, we ought to be active participants in what God wants us to do, but to make God’s help secondary to us helping ourselves gives us way too much credit. Rather, we should say, “God helps those who cannot help themselves.”

The fact of the matter is that THE CHRISTMAS GIFT (Jesus Christ) is someone we all desperately need. Without him we will perish in our sins. But if we receive him, we will live eternally with God’s help all the way! And then we can be like Mary—extolling God with all of our innermost being. And that really is the point of Christmas—God and His Son Jesus Christ. Not us!

I am impressed at how well Mary knows her Bible. The Hebrew Bible was the whole Bible at that time in history because Matthew to Revelation had not been written. Her song arose from her knowledge of the Word of God. Her words sound like Hannah’s in 1 Samuel 2:1 and 7-8. She seems to be very familiar with Hab. 3:18, Psalm 35:9, Isa 61:10; Psalm 138:6; 103:17; Psalm 147:6; Psalm 107:9; many Abrahamic covenant passages, and others as well. She had a wholistic understanding of how God promised to work in His people across the ages. The application should be obvious. We are not going to understand God very well if we do not have a handle on what He has told us in His book.

Despite the reputation of Nazareth (John 1:46, 7:52), some good people were in Nazareth in the early first century.

MAP

End Notes

ⁱ In God’s eyes, there was something unclean about childbirth—not that having children is sin, but the blood and so on is impure not just on a hygienic level but on a moral level under the Law.

ⁱⁱ See also Matt. 23:12, Luke 14:11, 18:14, 1 Peter 5:6 for the very clear Biblical teaching that the proud will be brought low and the low will be exalted.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ex. 4:23, 7:16, 8:1, 8:20, 9:1, 9:13, 10:3, Ezek. 20:40, cf. Acts 7:7.

^{iv} 1 Chron. 16:13, Ps. 105:6, Isa. 41:8, 44:1, 2, 21, 48:20, Jer. 30:10, 46:27-28, Ezek. 28:25, 37:25.