

Luke 1:46–55: Mary's Song

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[0 : 00] Well, let me just reiterate my own Christmas greetings to you on Christmas Sunday and especially to Taylor!

For now, a famous black preacher from Los Angeles, E.V. Hill, preached an installation service for a young minister in L.A. that was still in his teenage years.

The members of the congregation had reason to suspect what this younger minister might mean for them, especially given that he wasn't even old enough to vote in the congregational meeting that called him to be their pastor.

So, E.V. Hill rose behind the lectern and announced his title, and it was this, What does that boy have to teach me?

I got to hear E.V. Hill in person in the 80s and was thrilled with his preaching. Well, on this Christmas Sunday, you might be wondering, given that our text is Mary's song, this verse penned by one who in all likelihood wasn't even yet beyond her high school year, even now today being celebrated.

[1 : 46] I just want you to know that this young girl has quite a bit to teach us as we prepare for Christmas. The beautiful gate of the Jewish temple opened into the court of women.

And as you open the gate to the third gospel, we enter into the court for women. And more than any other evangelist, Luke records these women and their loving and varied ministries.

So wrote England's 19th century Methodist minister, Dr. Henry Burton. And he was right. For even before arriving at chapter two, where you will meet the long ago widowed Anna serving in the court of women, we come to Luke chapter one.

And we've already been introduced then to young Mary, who's expecting her firstborn son, journeying on her way to see another woman, Elizabeth, her relative, who in her old age is also with child.

In the poem, the visitation of the Virgin, Rainer Wilkie imagines Mary's inner thoughts as she is making her way to the hill country where Elizabeth lives.

[3 : 23] And he pens his imaginings this way. In the beginning, it went easy for her. But sometimes on a climb, she became already aware of her wonderful body.

And she stood breathing on the high Judean hills. It was not the land below, but her fullness spread around her.

Walking, she had a feeling you cannot ever go beyond the greatness that she now had. And it moved her to want to lay her hand on the womb of the other woman who was further along.

Each full of her holiness, took comfort with her kin. The savior in her was still only a bloom.

But joy so carried away the Baptist that he leaped in her cousin's womb. And this Christmas story that we celebrate this week cannot possibly be told without the placement of these particular special women.

[4 : 47] And the children that they would bear. And especially the song that Mary would sing. There it is. There's my title. There it is.

There's my title. Mary's song. And my hopes for our time are simply this. That come Christmas, we all should become songwriters.

Mary's song has long been referred to as the Magnificat. And the editors of the Bible from which I am reading, I don't know, you can look at the one you have open before you, continue in that centuries old tradition.

Why so? What is this word Magnificat? It's the first word in the Latin translation of the song, picking up on the word in verse 46.

My soul magnifies the Lord. Mary's Magnificat is Mary's magnifying of the Lord.

[6 : 02] Think about it. Her song is an expression of her desire to magnify the Lord.

To have her soul make the Lord large. Think of a magnifying glass and how it might enlarge the object.

Now, her song then comes out and says, my soul would function as a magnifying glass and place the Lord in an ever-largening view before my readers.

She wants you to catch a glimpse of how big her God is and in particular what he's done for her. Notice something about her praise.

She says, my soul would magnify the Lord, but she links it poetically with her spirit that is rejoicing in God her Savior.

[7 : 06] Now, take note of the connection between one's praise and one's enjoyment because it's going to underlie everything I think I'm after in the sermon.

There is a relationship by way of principle between our praise of something and our enjoyment in something or in this case in someone.

Now, her praise of the Lord is connected to her enjoyment. These two ideas are going hand in hand. hand in hand. C.S. Lewis, 20th century writer, put it this way.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment.

It is, it's a pointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are.

[8 : 11] The delight is incomplete till it is expressed. Now, this is what Mary's doing here in the opening lines of her song, Come Christmas.

She's singing praises to the Lord, rejoicing in the Lord, and thereby completing her enjoyment of what the Lord has done.

Put it this way, your enjoyment of Christmas is not complete without your praise of the Lord. Praise is the appointed end of enjoyment.

It's worth remembering on Christmas. You and I, this very week, should find words.

Words that are spoken to someone that would intentionally praise God as the completion of your enjoyment of the season.

[9 : 17] Your soul, my soul, this week must find voice in ways that make God big in the presence of others.

Our singing of his praises are essential to the completion of our joy. So it is like I said at the outset, come Christmas, each one of us should become songwriters.

Mary's song magnifies the Lord, thereby completing her enjoyment of God and what he has done for her in two ways.

I want you to see this in the text. You should look at it. She actually pens this poem, this song, in two stanzas.

Think of them as verses that are accompanied by the melody of her praise. The first is there in verses 46 to 49.

[10:22] It sings of the honor that the Lord bestowed on her. You can see the personal nature of it. My soul, my spirit, my Savior.

They'll call me blessed. He's done things for me. See, this first stanza really is now highlighting and singing of the honor that the Lord has bestowed on her.

The second stanza is longer. It's amplified. It moves beyond what the Lord has done for her by way of honor. And rather, in verses 50 to 55, complements it by amplifying that the mercy of the Lord isn't just something he's done for her.

It extends to us all. It extends to us all. So there it is, as we now are in through the gate into the court of women and into the song that Mary sung and imbibing, in a sense, her soul come Christmas to magnify God, to make him great, to complete her enjoyment, to praise his name, for honoring her, for extending mercy to all.

Both of which ought to make songwriters of each one of us. Let's take a look at her verse on honor.

[11:56] Her honor. Verses 46 to 49. The honor that the Lord bestowed on Mary comes wrapped as a gift in the word blessed.

You can see that word there in verse 48. Right there in the middle. For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed.

That's her honor. It's a multi-generational honor of blessedness. In fact, I was looking at this verse this week, trying to determine how many things she's thankful for.

I mean, in my translation, verse 48 reads, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. Well, that's certainly something to be thankful for. And even the word for indicates some causal relationship.

The word for is also there in verse 49. For he who is mighty has done great things for me. We could speak of all those things. But right in between those two is this phrase for behold.

[13:12] From now on, all generations will call me blessed. Now you'd have to look at the original text to understand that the first and the third four almost function like that.

Because. But this middle one functions as the centerpiece of it all. For behold. In fact, in the original, the word behold isn't even there. It's just the writer's attempt to let you know of the three things that are being said.

It's the one in the middle that's captured her heart. This is my honor. That generations would call me blessed. Well, you're not going to get that.

That's her praise. But I do want you to see that this isn't the first time that it's been spoken of concerning Mary. I mean, take a look back even further.

The greeting that Elizabeth gave her just on the front side of our reading today. The same word is highlighted. It was given to Mary by Elizabeth upon her arrival in the hill country.

[14:22] Look at verse 42. This is now Elizabeth exclaiming with a loud cry. Here's our word. 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 that which was spoken to her from the Lord. Elizabeth's words are actually echoing in Mary's mind as she begins to pen her own Christmas hymn.

I am magnifying God because all generations will call me blessed. The very word three times over that Elizabeth bestowed upon her.

And in each case, the reasons for which Mary is to be honored are clear, good, godly, and ongoing.

[15:30] This is the way we ought to view Mary. Blessed is Mary first, according to Elizabeth, among women. Only one gives birth to Jesus.

Of all the women in the world through all the centuries, over all time, Mary is right to almost be overwhelmed with the kindness, the graces, the mercies of God who would say, I have looked, as the angel said to her, upon you with favor, and you will give birth to a son, and they will call his name Jesus.

And Mary understands, are you kidding me? Out of all the world, among all the women, for some unknown reason unto myself, I would be the one?

What Elizabeth says, blessed are you among women. But it goes on. Elizabeth says, blessed are you for the one that is in your womb.

She moves beyond Mary to the one she's carrying. Mary, you are so honored by God because the one in your womb is the one who will complete God's blessing for the world.

[16:57] You're blessed, but you are carrying the world's blessing within you. Imagine, this single word, blessed, blessing, is one of the few words in all the scriptures that I believe can carry the whole message of the Bible from beginning to end.

Because God creates the earth in six days, and on the seventh, he rests, and he blessed it, called it holy. And Abraham came, and God said, I will bless you, and I will make your name great.

And from you, all the families of the earth will be blessed. And this blessed one is the one who stands before the Lord. This word, this word now is in the fullness of the one that's in her womb.

The blessed Mary is holding the blessing of God for all of us. No wonder, she exclaims. My soul rejoices.

My heart is magnifying. Christmas is the most immeasurable goodness and kindness of God that he would put one in the world who would bring blessing to us all.

[18:05] Indeed, she's blessed among women. She's blessed for the one in her womb. She knows she's carrying Emmanuel, God with us.

Which, by way of instruction, comes back to the creed that we affirm today in Nicaea. 325 A.D.

Conversations are in play about the person of Christ and his mysterious union with us in the flesh as a man, and yet his incalculable truth that he is also God.

And there are people that are wondering, how do you put this incarnation together, fully God, fully man? And there's one, Athanasius, who says, well, he is God.

And there's another, Arius, who says, he's not God. He's just, she bore the Christ. Whereas Athanasius is like, no, she bore God.

[19:10] She's the God-bearer. And so the Nicene Creed is emerging on the face and the landscape of church history in order to signal that Jesus, who was in the cradle, is nevertheless, nonetheless, very God of very God, light of light, true God of true God.

He's God. God. And that debate goes all the way through the centuries. But it was formulated first in 325.

Thus the significance of a creed to help us in our own wonderings about who is this God-man, a firm that come Christmas, the babe is God in flesh, the Godhead see.

It isn't until, I don't know, somewhere in the 5th century, they have another council, Ephesus, because there's another guy on the playing field of church history named Nestorius, who says, you know, I don't think Jesus was God.

I think there are two things going on. There's a human thing and there's a divine thing. And we ought to think of it as two things. And the church reaffirms in the middle of the 5th century what they did in Nicaea over 100 years before.

[20 : 40] And it's something that we need to continue to affirm today. But in one sense, you need to know that when Elizabeth says, blessed is the fruit of your womb, she is indicating the mystery of Christmas, which we affirm today, Jesus, born in a manger, fully God, fully man, not to be bifurcated, to be completely understood, but to be embraced.

What a blessedness then that goes to her. And then there's a third, blessed, the reason for her honor that Elizabeth brings forth.

Blessed are you, there it is in verse 46, is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

I love this. When Elizabeth elevates Mary, she does so on the back of Mary's faith.

Mary's trust in the word of God is what you ought to hold on to. Is it any wonder then that we find Mary's song celebrating this threefold honor?

[22 : 06] And to cast it in generational terms. Mary's honor is that she is favored by God, blessed by God, blessed among women, blessed for the one in her womb, blessed for her faith, blessed for her belief.

And in these ways, we are right to honor Mary. Every generation ought to have a rightful admiration of the virgin girl who gives birth to our Lord.

It's stunning. That said, of course, to speak of the veneration of Mary would take things too far.

We don't worship Mary. We don't pray to Mary. She's not our intercessor, nor was she sinless. Take note, even in her own song, she's stipulating on these matters.

My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. She understands that she stands with us in need of the one who she will deliver to us.

[23 : 15] As my wife likes to say, Mary was expecting a Savior long before she was expecting a son.

And this, then, is the way in which we consider Mary. But there's more here for us to meditate on in regard to her song this Christmas.

The so what of the last six or seven minutes. So what about Mary's honor, Mary's blessedness? Let me say to you, has not the Lord bestowed any honors upon you?

Now, you're not going to bear his son. And the honors that he provides are not necessarily going to be connected to some multi-generational move.

The scriptures are clear. Before you and I are in the ground, we won't be remembered beyond two generations. And that's okay. But nevertheless, has not God honored you in some way?

[24 : 26] When we got married 42 years ago now, my grandfather, who had been a minister, prayed a prayer that had been written by Louis Evans.

Louis Evans, I think a minister. Man, I've got two L.A. connections today. Must be an L.A. Christmas. Yeah, if you know music, you got it.

There's a line in the prayer that went like this that was prayed over us. Now, make such assignments on the scroll of thy will as to develop their character as they walk together.

Never forgotten that line from our wedding day. A pleading before God that now makes such assignments on the scroll of thy will.

Develop them together. You know, the book of Ephesians speaks that we are his workmanship created for the good works he has prepared for us.

[25 : 41] Each of us has been created not only in the image of God, but with the intention or design that we would fulfill particular things that he has for us.

And so this Christmas, I'm asking you that question. What honors has he given to you? To Nehemiah, he gave the honor of building a wall, not coming down till it was done.

To Ruth, he gave the honor of giving birth to Obed, who would find his way generations later as a predecessor of King David. To Joseph, he gave the honor of a difficult and downward trajectory that succeeding generations would know something of the humility and the sufferings that are accompanied in God's salvation.

To Phoebe, he gave the honor of being a fellow worker of Paul, that the world might know who Jesus is. And what I'm asking you is, what assignments has he given to you on the scroll of his will that you are to complete that would praise him and complete your enjoyment of him?

What are you to build? Is there a field you're supposed to glean in? Is there a child you're supposed to nurture? Is there a long road that you must endure this Christmas?

[27 : 08] Put words of praise before others that would magnify God for whatever it is he's given you to do. That puts purpose in your step every day.

You rise and you wait and you look and you say, I'm to complete something for the magnification of my Lord. I'm seeing it every day right now.

And my own father, who's begun at the age of 92, chemo, said, you know, I got a high pain tolerance. Let's go. Every day now he wakes up.

This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it. And you're looking for daily purpose that what he's bringing you through now would be penned into verse that others would hear.

Make much of Jesus' name this Christmas. Put words of praise in ways that would magnify your Lord.

[28 : 11] In other words, come Christmas, we should all be songwriters. Well, let me turn the page, not by a length of time in the message, but by the turn of stanza in her song.

It moves from her honor to something about his mercy. You see that there in verses 50 through 55? I mean, it only takes a third grader's reading of the text to point out to those of us who are older that the word mercy, his mercy, comes out of the gate in verse 50.

And that same word functions as the back end in verse 54. There's something in Mary's song that goes beyond, hey, I just want to tell you what God did for me.

He's like, no, I got to tell you what God did for me, but I want to amplify what he does for anyone who would fear him from generation to generation.

There's something about Christmas that is wrapped up in this word mercy. What is the mercy that is purported to reach back in time?

[29 : 43] You can see it there. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. Or verse 54. It's a mercy that goes all the way back in remembrance to what he said to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.

What is this mercy that goes back to Abraham and yet lands this advent in your seed? Genesis 19 talks about God being merciful to Abraham that through him the promises a king would come, a ruler would come.

And it's wedded to the promises that he had already been given in Genesis 12, that through him blessing would come to all the families of the earth.

So the promise to Abraham and all of his succeeding generations is a mercy that in human flesh there would be a righteous ruler who would deliver his people and provide blessing to all the families of the earth.

That is what she is saying here. I want to praise God for his mercy. I want to praise God that his promises have been fulfilled in the birth of this little one coming forth into the world through Mary on Christmas night, laid in a manger, that in this weak one we see the very mercy of God that can save anyone, everyone, you even to this day.

[31:12] What a mercy stands before us. This is why Jesus at the end of Luke's gospel actually returns to this theme. And when he sends out his people, not in his infancy, not in his boyhood, not even in his teaching, but in his death and resurrection, he says, go and proclaim to everyone forgiveness of sins in my name.

Now that's mercy. That's unmerited favor. That's grace. You want the favor of God? How can it get any better than the forgiveness of your sins through the one that he sent in his only son?

This is beautiful. Your rescue comes in the one who rules because only the one who rules is strong enough to overcome all the things to which we have been enslaved.

And this is why Christmas matters. And all of this is captured in her song. It doesn't surprise me then that she has this great flourish of reversals that the mercy of God would work in this way.

Notice how these verses in 52 and 53 and 51 all reverse the way the world works through strength, but how God scatters that.

[32:35] How the mighty ones are brought down and the humble are exalted. How the ones who don't have anything and are hungry end up going away rich because they have life, the very bread of heaven.

It's the canticle of turning. From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone. Let the king beware.

For your justice tears every tyrant from his throne. The hungry poor shall weep no more. For the food they can never earn. There are tables spread and every mouth fed.

For the world is about to turn. And then the verse in the canticle of turning says, my heart shall sing of the day you bring.

This is what's happening. And it can happen this Christmas for you. The manger is the perfect reflection of the reversals that are in play with what God does and how he does it.

[33:37] And that it gives hope to each one. May this year. No. May this week. No. May this day. Find you, Christian or non-Christian. Understanding. Embracing. Relishing. Exalting. The birth of Christ. The honor of Mary. The mercy of the world. The salvation of our souls. And may you find words. Because come Christmas we all should become songwriters.

Think of King Richard. Shakespeare's retelling. He says. This is what I hope for some of you even in this moment. I give this.

[34:39] Heavy weight. From off my head. And this unwieldy scepter. From my hand. The pride of kingly sway.

From out my heart. With my own hands. I give away my crown. With my own tongue.
Deny my sacred state.

All pomp and majesty. I do forswear. I lay it down. At the feet. Of Jesus.

So I leave. I'm done. I'm in my seat. I certainly understand church traditions. That
encourage congregants to look to somebody next to you and say.

Has the Lord done anything for you today? Has he been good to anyone here today? I
understand because. Your enjoyment.

[35 : 47] Isn't complete. Until your praise. Is expressed. I know there's all kinds of church traditions.
That'll say. Nah. That's beneath me man.

I'm not doing that. I'm not sitting up here to find words. To tell people what God did for me.
But let me tell you something. There's something to be learned. From the virgin.

And from church traditions today. Who understand. That one's enjoyment of Christmas. Is
incomplete. Until your praises.

Begin to be expressed. And your praises. Won't be expressed. Until you understand. That
your soul was created.

To make him large. And that the honors he's given you. Are yours. For us. That the
mercies.

[36 : 46] That have been extended to you. Are to be celebrated. May it be so. Merry Christmas. Our
Heavenly Father.

Help us to rejoice. Help us to take hold of. The virgin's. Song. And may it call us to what
we need to do.

This very week. To complete. Our joy. His name we pray. His name we pray. As they're
coming.

I'm going to give you a minute. To think about your week ahead. And an opportunity.
Someone you're going to see.

Family or otherwise. There might only be three lines. Where you can express. Your
praise. Thereby.

[37 : 53] Complete. His intended joy. Christ's name. We ask for that. Let's pray.