

What Child Is This?

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Preacher: Joshua Winters

[0 : 00] If you have your Bible with you, you can open it up to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1. Last Sunday, we heard about Mary's spectacular encounter with the angel Gabriel and the word that God spoke to her, that she would conceive and bear a son and that her son would be the Messiah and reign forever.

We heard that she would conceive without a human father by the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowing her and that as a result, her son would be the very son of God.

Well, this morning, we continue the story as documented by Luke and we are in verse 39 of chapter 1. At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea where she entered Zachariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

So Mary has just had this amazing encounter with Gabriel and the sense we get here is that she wastes no time. She just packs her bags and heads out of town.

She hits the road down to the Judean town where her relatives Elizabeth and Zachariah live. And we might wonder, why does she do this? It doesn't say here in the text exactly what Mary's reasons are of her thinking, but we know from back up in verse 36 that Elizabeth is Mary's relative.

[1 : 35] The old King James translation says cousin. Cousin, 400 years ago, cousin was a more general term referring to kin, someone who belonged to your extended family or to your clan, but didn't already have a title like grandma or grandpa or aunt or uncle.

So Mary has that connection with Elizabeth. Elizabeth is kin. She's extended family. And Mary has just heard from Gabriel that she's pregnant, that Elizabeth is now six months pregnant.

So they have the pregnancy in common. And if we're listening closely to what Gabriel said to Mary, the reason Elizabeth is pregnant in her old age is because no word from God will ever fail.

So there's a bit of a hint there that maybe Mary picked up on, an allusion to the fact that God had spoken a word about Elizabeth's son as well, just as he did to Mary about her son.

And then we can add on top of all that, Mary's situation. She's not yet married. She's just engaged. But she's been told that she's going to conceive and be pregnant without Joseph.

[2 : 53] Before the wedding, she's going to be with child. And so you could think of the societal implications of this for her. Not to mention that what are people going to think if you tell them that you had a visit from an angel and that you're going to give birth to the Messiah?

People might say that you're crazy. So like, who can I talk to about this? Getting out of town and going to visit Elizabeth seems like just such a natural choice. If she too has received a word from God and as a result has become pregnant, she might be just the person to share my news with.

So Mary makes the several days journey down to the hill country of Judea where Elizabeth and Zechariah live and she enters the house and greets Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a loud voice, she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

[4 : 25] I love this moment. It's like Mary barely gets in the door. She just finishes saying hello and Elizabeth is joyfully shouting back to Mary, You're pregnant!

And you're going to have a very special child. You're pregnant with the one who is my Lord. Now, how did Elizabeth even know that Mary was pregnant?

It says Mary hurried down to where Elizabeth was to visit her and so probably Mary wasn't even showing yet. How did Elizabeth even know that Mary was pregnant?

Luke mentions two things. First, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. Little baby John, who was still in the womb of Elizabeth, leaped for joy.

Sprung about for joy. Now, if that doesn't express the personality and humanity of the unborn, pre-born child, I don't know what does.

[5 : 41] And now I know what some of us might be thinking. Some of us skeptics might wonder, you know, isn't that just something that pregnant women sometimes make up? You know, like, I know it's a boy or I know it's a girl because of these certain movements that I've been feeling, only to find out later when the child is born that that feeling was wrong.

How could Elizabeth know that John, the six-month-old baby in her womb, had joy? And that that's the reason that he leaped or sprung about in her womb.

Well, there's an important detail here that I think makes sense of it all. Verse 41. It says, When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit in this moment. Think about this. God himself entered into Elizabeth in this moment.

This is how Elizabeth knew that Mary was pregnant the moment that she walked in the door. And not just pregnant, but pregnant with a blessed child, pregnant with, in Elizabeth's words, my Lord.

[7 : 02] Only God, by his spirit, could reveal this to Elizabeth, this secret of Mary's in a moment like this. Think about how strange this moment would be to an outsider looking in.

I mean, an elderly woman just called the child in a young girl's womb her Lord. How could she know that that's who Mary's baby was?

But by the Spirit of God who had filled her in that moment, and I think it's also reasonable to conclude that it was by the Spirit that Elizabeth knew of the joy in little John's heart even though he's only six months old.

How else could she know that? That it was for joy, that that was the reason he sprung about in the womb. All of this is yet another sign that God is at work.

That everything that God has been saying through these angelic visitations is coming true. that Elizabeth's son will be who Gabriel said and that Mary's son will be the Messiah, the Son of God.

[8 : 18] Elizabeth commends Mary for her faith in the Lord's promise. She says, blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

and then at this point we read about Mary's response. Verse 46, and Mary said, and what follows is a fairly lengthy thing that Mary says from verse 46 all the way down to verse 55.

And we're going to dig into the meaning of this in just a moment. But first, before we get to that, what is this thing that Mary utters? Many of the little subtitles in our Bibles may say something like Mary's song.

This utterance of Mary's has been traditionally called the Magnificat. And it's called that because in the Latin translation of this passage, Magnificat is the first word, the word for glorifies or magnifies. And there's a lot of debate and discussion over what this passage is. Is it a song that Mary composed or sung? Or is it just a declaration that she made?

[9 : 36] Did she say this right on the spot after Elizabeth said what she did in verse 45? Or did Mary write this later as sort of a personal reflection about what God was doing around the time when she became pregnant?

Well, first of all, there's nothing here in this passage that says that it is a song. The subtitles in the Bible may say Mary's song, but they're not part of the original text.

They're not inspired. They're added later by editors to help us know what's in a section, where one section ends and another begins and what that section's about. Luke says, Mary said, and then the words that follow are spoke, not Mary sung this song.

And so I would take this as a spoken word from Mary. But, there is a very obvious poetic characteristics to Mary's words.

Scholars who know the original languages better than I do discern a pattern of meter and rhythm in these words that's common in the Psalms and in other poetic passages found in the Bible.

[10 : 49] Not only that, but there is that signature characteristic of Hebrew poetry, which is parallelism. Some English translations today even adjust the formatting to reflect the various lines of this poetic utterance.

And so, it's understandable that some have concluded that this was a song or a hymn. At the very least, it's psalm-like in its form. And so I'm comfortable calling it a psalm.

Whether Mary spoke this aloud in the moments immediately following her arrival at Elizabeth's house or composed this a little bit later, personally, I don't see why either couldn't be the case. But some of the discussion around this, some have a hard time imagining how Mary could utter something so wonderfully poetic and true of this length on the spot, spontaneously.

Others suggest that, well, maybe she's been crafting this expression of praise in her mind from the time that she heard the word from Gabriel till now, which I guess would mean that she's been composing this during her trip down from Nazareth.

[11 : 59] Others notice that this psalm of Mary's is just rich with allusions to the Old Testament. And some wonder how Mary, being so young, could know the scriptures that well.

or is it possible that just like Elizabeth moments ago, Mary herself is also filled with the Spirit of God and that God's Spirit gives her these words just like he did for the psalmists long ago.

Whatever the case, here it is, the very words of Mary which describe something of what she was feeling and thinking at the time when she became pregnant with the Son of God.

Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed for the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

[13 : 17] He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever just as he promised our ancestors.

In the first lines of this psalm Mary describes her own response to all that's happening with her. She says my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. The parallelism is quite obvious here.

My soul and my spirit both refer to Mary's inner inner being. The Lord and God are both referring to the same person.

[14 : 29] But notice the words glorifies and rejoice which are parallels but slightly different. What is Mary's response in all this?

It is both worship and rejoicing. It's a joyful worship that's just flowing out of the very depths of her being.

Her soul her very spirit is just joyfully praising God giving glory to him. We get the sense that this is not a difficult thing for Mary to say.

These words declare the worthiness and greatness of God but it's not as though she had to sit down and think about what do I write about him? They're just ready to burst forth from deep down inside of her like a fountain.

Notice that Mary calls God her savior. Why that? At this point in the story she likely has very little understanding of the idea of God saving her from the penalty of her sins.

[15 : 42] God but if we look back into the Old Testament we see that God is referred to many times as my savior or our savior.

King David was one who referred to God many times in the Psalms this way and for David it was often salvation from enemies or from troubles that he found himself in.

God himself even takes up this title of savior as he speaks later on through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 43 verse 3 For I am the Lord your God the Holy One of Israel your savior.

A little further down in verse 11 of the same chapter I even I am the Lord and apart from me there is no savior. In chapter 45 verse 15 Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself the God and savior of Israel.

All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced. They will go off into disgrace together but Israel will be saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation.

[16 : 57] You will never be put to shame or disgraced to ages everlasting. And what's interesting about all of these mentions of God as savior is that they're not so much focused on the sin and atoning part.

They're focused on the plight of Israel at this time. There are nations that are coming against them. God is handing them over in judgment and he is promising to bring them back and to save them from exile, to bring them back into the land.

And there's even an ultimate kind of finality to it as well. We see that Israel will be saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation. The prophet Habakkuk, he also refers to God as savior in this familiar passage, Habakkuk 3:17, though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my savior.

I don't think it's a stretch to say that Mary probably borrowed from Habakkuk's words, just the way it's phrased, it has the same parallelism as she made her own statement of praise.

But we notice in all these passages that the title of savior or deliverer is just loaded with meaning. God is the great savior and deliverer of Israel.

[18:34] both in times past and through the words of the prophets, we see that he will be the savior and deliverer in the ultimate future and the end times.

The main thrust of God as savior up until this point in the story is in relation to trouble and calamity, personal hardship, the attacks of enemies, oppression by foreign powers.

sinner. And the sin and that stuff, the guilt, that's coming. We're going to hear more about that from Jesus. But let's go on to the next verse and see how Mary is thinking here.

My spirit rejoices in God my savior for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

Quite literally, he has looked upon the humble or low state of his slave. And from now on, all generations will call me blessed.

[19:48] What does Mary have in mind when she says that God has been mindful of her humble state, state?

Her low state. Now I don't think she's just saying something out of false humility here or just saying some kind of a humble word just to be spiritual.

She's deeply moved in the core of her being that God would choose her in her humble, low, nothing state to be the bearer of his son.

It's like Mary is saying, God, you're taking me from the very bottom and now you're lifting me up, exalting me. Even the next generations of people will consider me specially blessed by you.

And so Mary, according to her own words, has just now experienced this great reversal in her life from down here to now up here. And this is not something that a lot of people tend to talk about, but could it be that up until now, Mary has known a hard life, a life of poverty perhaps, or some other hardship?

[21:15] Is that what she's alluding to when she says, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant? Think about where Mary has been living, in Nazareth, that little town in the hill country of Galilee about which Nathaniel would later say, Nazareth, can anything good come from Nazareth?

Now, we don't know anything about Mary's life before all this, but perhaps Mary's words here are a veiled reference to how difficult things have been for her.

Could it be that Mary is calling God her savior, deliverer, not just because that's who he is and has been throughout all of history, but because that's what she feels like is happening in her life right now.

God's lifting her up from the dust of whatever low and humble and hard things she's lived through, to now knowing one of the greatest gifts ever given to a woman, to be the mother of the Messiah, to carry and give birth to the very son of God.

One thing is for certain, do you see any sort of hint here that Mary thinks God is doing this for her because of how good she's been? No.

[22:40] It's a total opposite. Like, despite my humble, low estate, he has done great things for me.

Mary calls God the mighty one, which is another name ascribed to God in the Old Testament times. As far back as the book of Genesis, God is called the mighty one of Jacob, the mighty one of Israel. Holy is his name, she says. It's another expression also found in the Psalms in the Old Testament. There's nobody like you, Lord. Verse 50.

His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. It's another truth that's been spoken in the Old Testament before about God.

But there's a sense maybe in which Mary just feels and understands and appreciates this even more deeply. All these generations and years later, here she is, a little girl in Nazareth and she fears the Lord and now God has extended his kindness, his mercy, his love to her.

[24 : 04] Verse 51. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. hearts. At this point, Mary now begins to speak about the mighty acts of God and specifically how God often deals with different kinds of people.

And the whole Old Testament is really the story of God doing mighty deeds with his arm. With his arm is a poetic figure of speech. But all through the scriptures up until now, we see these kind of great moments in Israel's history.

history, the parting of the Red Sea and deliverance for Israel from the once powerful and great Egyptian Pharaoh and his horde of chariots comes to mind.

Other great deliverances and big battles and times when his people were in need come to mind throughout the centuries. And then Mary specifically puts words to how God has dealt with the proud.

She says, he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. The Tower of Babel comes to mind.

[25 : 23] He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. The Philistines fleeing for their lives after the shepherd boy David slew Goliath comes to mind.

And again, there are so many of these moments in history in which God has displayed his might and his power by scattering the proud. Mary goes on with this.

Verse 52, he has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. This is an amazing thing that we see God do again and again in the Old Testament.

He brings down proud rulers. Think of the four kings who conquered Sodom and Gomorrah. God brought them and their armies down before Abraham, the shepherd, in Genesis chapter 14.

He brought the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah down in Genesis 19 when he destroyed those two cities with fire and brimstone from heaven. He brought Pharaoh and his mighty armies down at the Red Sea.

[26 : 39] All of Pharaoh's proud boasts against God came to nothing. He brought the kings east of the Jordan River down before his people after 40 years of them wandering in the desert.

he brought 31 kings of the Canaanite peoples down before the children of Israel when they entered the promised land as detailed in the book of Joshua.

He brought down the kings of the Moabites and the Midianites and the Ammonites and the Amorites and through all these delivers that he raised up through the period of the judges.

He brought the kings of the Philistines to their knees before his anointed king David and Solomon and even the kings of Israel the northern kingdom the wicked ones.

He brought them down too. Men like Ahab Jeroboam even the wicked kings of Judah. God brought the proud Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar down in spectacular fashion as detailed in the book of Daniel.

[27 : 52] He brought down the arrogant Belshazzar and the list just goes on and on and on. This is one of God's signature acts of power.

He will only permit an arrogant or proud ruler to hold sway for so long and then he brings them down. But the flip side of this there's a flip side to this signature act of God.

God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. God not only uses his great power to humble the proud but he also uses it to exalt the lowly.

Who was Abraham? A nomadic shepherd and foreigner from the east whose wife was barren. He had no children of his own and God promised to make him the father of nations.

Who was Moses? A Hebrew baby set adrift in a basket. The child of a slave. And God rose him up to be the prince of Egypt and then he went back down after committing murder.

[29 : 08] He fled and he became a lowly shepherd in Midian. And then God raised him up to be a great prophet and deliverer and leader for the whole nation. Who was Hannah?

She was the barren wife of Elkanah who was constantly being provoked by her rival and probably other women she knew until one day God opened her womb and gave her a son and made her the mother of the great prophet Samuel.

Who was King David? He was the least of Jesse's sons. He was the one that they didn't even invite to come meet the prophet Samuel when he came.

They left him out to look after the sheep and yet God took him from the pasture and raised him up to the throne of Israel. Again and again we see this tendency of God to use his power to lift up the humble and to exalt them.

And why is Mary declaring this wonderful thing that God does? Because she is one of these lowly people. A nothing girl from Nazareth now exalted above all women with this gift that God has given to her to be the mother of Jesus.

[30 : 32] Verse 53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. perhaps this is another possible hint of what Mary has known up until now.

Has she known hunger? Has she known poverty? She seems to speak of the rich as though she isn't one of them.

Now the promise of the angel wasn't to put more food on the table or to put more money in her purse but it will be something even more deeply satisfying and wonderful fulfilling a deeper hunger hunger of the heart and soul this son that she will bear.

She closes in this way He has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever just as he promised our ancestors.

here Mary reflects on how this wonderful gift of God the Messiah whom she will bear is not just a gift to her but to all Israel.

[31 : 50] God hasn't forgotten us. He has not forgotten to show mercy. even before baby Jesus is born you can see it in her words Mary recognizes her son as the one through whom God will keep the promises he has made the promises which first started coming to Abraham and then were added to later to Isaac to Jacob to Moses to David and on this is it Mary sees it she understands just who her son is and will be she really did take those words of Gabriel to heart and believe them Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home there are so many ways that some of these words could touch us or speak to us we could reflect a lot on

Mary's life we could compare that to what maybe some of you are going through right now we could think a lot about God's mighty deeds and how he humbles the proud and how he exalts the humble these things relate to us in so many ways but more than anything what does God want our response to all this to be why is it here why is Luke telling us this he's showing us what Elizabeth's response to all this was he's showing us what Mary's response to all this was and I think there's a question for us in this do we realize do we recognize just who this child of Mary's was and is do we know that this baby who was in Mary's womb is our

Lord do we recognize that all of God's promises made through the generations leading up to this are fulfilled in this one son Jesus he is everything do you know this do you believe this do you see it all the signs are pointing to this 2,000 years ago that's what Luke's trying to show us do you see it I want to invite the worship team to come up and we're going to sing our response movimiento to do, together to foam let's do not