

The Magnificat

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[0 : 00] Will you turn with me again to Luke chapter 1 as we continue our studies in the book of Luke Acts?

Luke chapter 1 verse 46, my soul magnifies the Lord. For over a thousand years, every day, both morning and evening, Christians from many different traditions have repeated the so-called Magnificat of Mary.

What Psalm 23 is to us, the Magnificat is to them, the first learned, the oftenest repeated, the most precious song in their Christian tradition.

Whereas perhaps we would take the greatest comfort in the words, the Lord is my shepherd, they take similar comfort in the words, my soul magnifies the Lord.

Who is to say they're wrong and we're right? We're just different. Have you ever experienced the ecstasy of praise? The ecstasy of praise.

[1 : 12] The expression of a heart bursting with the worship of Jesus Christ. Have you ever been where Mary is in this passage here? So captivated by the glory of the love and holiness of God that you can't keep silent anymore.

You just have to sing. Her song is called the Magnificat because its first words translated into Latin are Magnificat anime mea dominum.

That which animates me, that which makes me live, that which makes me tick. Magnifies the Lord. My animating principle, the life of the soul, is the praise of God.

The word magnify as used here has all but lost its meaning in English. When I was a boy hearing this word in church, I conjured up pictures in my mind of scientists in laboratories studying God under a microscope.

And I would think to myself, is God really so small that he needs a microscope to see him? But originally in English, the word magnify meant to highly glorify, to exult in.

[2 : 29] I like the way in which my own reading Bible, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, translates it. My soul praises the greatness of the Lord.

My soul praises the greatness of the Lord. Yes, that's what Mary's doing here. She is praising the greatness of God. The truth about what God has done by conferring upon her the privilege of being the mother of the Messiah is beginning to strike home.

She's experiencing what we may call the ecstasy of praise. Her heart is bursting with thankfulness to and worship of God on account of Jesus Christ.

She is so captivated and captured by the glory of the mercy and the holiness of God. She can't keep silent anymore.

She must sing. Now, the Magnificat of Mary reads rather like a psalm because that's what it is. It's a New Testament psalm of praise.

[3 : 42] It's not obvious in our English version, but it's made up of five sentences. It's arranged in a two-sentence, one-sentence, two-sentence structure.

The central sentence being the heart of the psalm. In verse 49 and 50, it's split in our English translations, which is unfortunate. This is the central sentence.

Holy is his name. And his mercy is to generations and generations to those who fear him.

Holy is his name. And his mercy is to generations and generations of those who fear him. So Mary's ecstasy of praise, this expression of her heart bursting with praise, focuses upon the holiness and the mercy of God in the sending of Christ.

This is an incredibly beautiful and expressive song, but it's also intensely theological. It reveals Mary's deep understanding of the language and the meaning of the Old Testament, where the theme of God's promises to Abraham back in Genesis dominates every story and every song.

[5 : 00] Mary now understands that through her and in her time, God is fulfilling all the promises he has made to his people for thousands of years.

And her soul is bursting with the praise of the Lord. We too can join her as we see this song from three perspectives this morning.

First, the holiness of God is seen in his mercy. Second, the mercy of God is seen in his help. And third, the help of God is seen in our praise.

It may not be what animates a free kirker, the magnificent of Mary. But can we at least join in praise with millions of Christians who morning and evening engage in saying, My soul magnifies the Lord. First of all then, the holiness of God is seen in his mercy. The holiness of God is seen in his mercy.

[6 : 12] The heart of the song is found in the words, And holy is his name, and his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. So at the center of her praise is the holiness of God.

The burning purity and otherness of God. This is the fundamental attribute of God as Mary sees it. His holiness. That's what sets him apart from all others. Mary lived in days of greats. The great Roman Emperor Augustus.

The great King Herod. Their political and military power paraded before her eyes every day. Through soldiers garrisoned in her village.

But before the supreme holiness of God. These men are very far from great. They are mortal and foolish men.

[7 : 19] Swayed by their own passions. Limited by their own mortality and lack of wisdom. By contrast, the God who Mary worships. Is the one to whom the angels sing.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. Before Mary is struck with anything else about God. She's struck by his holiness.

This is where our praise and worship of God must begin. Not with our status. But with his sanctity. Not with our greatness. But with his glory.

Not with our haughtiness. But with his holiness. Our worship and praise has, in the first instance, got nothing to do with us at all.

It is all about, and only about, God. The burning purity. The altogether otherness of God. Let me recommend, if you're looking for a book on this, you read The Holiness of God by R.C. Sproul.

[8 : 31] Wonderful book. The Holiness of God evokes within us what the German theologian Rudolf Otto called, tremendous mystery and fascination.

Or what the biblical writers variously call, reverence and awe. Fear and trembling. This is your God. The Colossus. The all-powerful. The all-pure. And before him we sinful creatures must bow in humble adoration. The holiness of God is that at which we must fall to the ground, confessing our folly and our finitude, our mistakes and our mortality, our sickness and our sin.

This is the heart of Mary's praise. An infinitely big God. It's that sense, you know, of silence before God.

Amazed in his presence. Awestruck by his holiness. The biblical scholar J.B. Phillips wrote a famous book with a title, Your God is Too Small.

[9 : 50] Mary's God wasn't small. And that's why her soul praised his greatness. How big is your God?

But in what is the holiness of God best seen? In what is the holiness of God best seen? The heart of Mary's song is found in the words, Unholy is his name, and his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

The heart of the heart of this song, if we may use such words, isn't actually the holiness of God, but the mercy of God.

His mercy is to generations and generations. God's mercy is the centerpiece and trophy of his holiness.

His glory is his purity, the essence of his otherness. This is what it means for God to be holy. That he's full of mercy.

[10 : 59] Now the New Testament word mercy is the equivalent of the Old Testament word we variously translate as steadfast love, committed love, covenant love, the Hebrew word that some of you may know as chesed.

It's God's love for us. His infinite, infinite, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love for us. So intense, so inventive, so bountiful, so beautiful, so extraordinary, so extravagant.

Comes to prominence, most obviously in Psalm 136. Oh, thank the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever.

So the centerpiece of the holiness of God, the ultimate of his purity, is his love. Mary falls to her knees when she encounters the holiness of God.

She falls even further when she encounters his mercy. This steadfast love forms the spoke of the wheel from which all of Mary's praises spring.

[12:22] And particularly that love with which God in his sovereign grace and mercy loved her forefather Abraham, the father of the Jews.

And so in verse 54 we again read this, we again meet the mercy of God, this time in the context of how God remembered the mercy he showed to Abraham and his offspring.

This is a reference to what Bible students call the Abrahamic covenant. The set of promises God made to Abraham back in Genesis.

Let me briefly remind you of these four promises. I will be your God, you will be my people. I will make you as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand in the seashore.

To you I will give this land, the land of Canaan. And finally, and most importantly, through your offspring, all the earth will be blessed.

[13:22] In other words, the promise of the Messiah. Is the fulfillment of this promise that God made to Abraham not the greatest demonstration of the holiness and love of God?

That after these thousands of years since Abraham walked on the earth, ever since he first made the promise to Abraham, God has now filled the empty womb of the virgin with the promised Messiah.

Here then is God's covenant, Chesed, in action. God's steadfast love through generations. That a pregnant Mary worships the God who has fulfilled his promises to her forefather Abraham.

In her. In her. And through this unformed child she's carrying in her womb. So do you understand? Can you see this? God's mercy, God's love, the beating heart of this psalm, it doesn't revolve around Mary. It revolves around the child Jesus.

[14:31] In the book of Revelation we have this fantastic and marvelous picture of the whole of created being gathered in a vast circle around a central throne.

Worshipping and praising. But then in the center of that central throne there sits the Messiah. Jesus Christ. The lamb looking as if it had been slain.

In the magnificat of Mary the holiness of God is seen in the mercy of God. And that mercy, that steadfast love of God is demonstrated in the coming and the dying and the rising of Jesus Christ.

This is Mary's song. No less Christ focused than any hymn we may choose to sing. Entirely focused upon God's love to his people in Christ Jesus.

It is God's fulfillment of his age old promise to Abraham. She's singing of God's holiness. She's singing of his love. She's singing of Jesus Christ. He's no singing about herself.

[15:41] This is the true ecstasy of praise if you experience it for yourself. The fascinating mystery of the holiness of God that takes you to your knees. The faithful fulfillment of the love of God in the glorious Redeemer coming to save you.

That takes you to your face. Mary's calling us to praise God this morning. To worship him with heart, mind, will, body, voice, everything.

Past, present, future, soul, body. Your plans, your ambitions, your relationships. To join with the angels and the heavenly host.

As together we sing to the Lamb in the center of the throne. My soul magnifies the Lord. Second, the mercy of God is seen in his help.

In his help. One of the first things you notice as you read through the Magnificat carefully is the abundance of references to God.

[16:54] He has seen. He has done. He has shown strength. He has scattered the proud. He has brought down. He has exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry.

He has sent away the rich. He has helped. He has said. It's a song that's rich in Godward focus, right? Mary is so filled with praise that she points away from herself and draws all the attention to the holiness and the love of God.

This is the most beautiful feature of the Magnificat. Mary refuses introspection, but she consciously, deliberately, and intentionally focuses upon God and what he has done.

For her, the mercy and love of God is not an abstract idea described only in dusty theological textbooks and spoken of in oldy-worldy hymns. In a very real sense, the supreme demonstration of the love of God is seen as she begins to feel the child kicking in her womb.

And she realizes this child is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Consider with me of what she sings. Not the great achievements and qualities of men, but of the great attributes and achievements of God.

[18 : 24] She does not sing of the heaven that we have made of this world. She sings of the heaven come down into this world from God.

And the overriding theme of God's activities in the Magnificat can be summed up in one word. Reversal. Reversal.

God scatters the proud. God brings down the mighty. God sends the rich away empty. Those who in their own minds are high and lofty have it all sorted. God brings down with a crash.

Here's the consistent message of the Old Testament. That great reversal. Where those who have it good in this life have nothing to look forward to.

Think of Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus. God scattered that rich man. God brought that rich man down. God sent him away empty. Think of the power of the religious leadership of Mary's day.

[19 : 27] They held a vice-like grip. Over the people. With the thousands of religious laws they had created. To browbeat the people into submission.

Their religion being the instrument of their tyranny. And through this child being born to Mary. All the arrogance and hubris shall be utterly destroyed.

And those who are rich in this life's things. Those who put their hope in what they are now. What they do now. And what they have now.

Will end up with nothing. They perhaps are those in life who said. God helps those who help themselves. God helps those who help themselves.

Which is really code for. God helps them. Or just get on with doing what you like. And afterwards claim that God did it all for you. This child will destroy the edifice of religious respectability.

[20 : 32] Picture the scene in the Lord of the Rings. Where the ring of power having been destroyed. All the towers and all the armies of the enemy. Are utterly ruined. They fall to the ground.

Or the earth swallows. Earth opens up to swallow them. If we should take our last hymn upon our lips this morning. Tell out my soul.

We must be careful that we aren't the proud. God will scatter in the imaginations of our hearts. The mighty on our thrones. The rich whom God will send empty away.

If we are rich in our own eyes. Powerful in our own eyes. Proud of our own achievements. We are singing destruction to ourselves.

Far from being the ecstasy of praise. These words shall be our doom. But on the other hand. The reversal works the other way for the righteous.

[21 : 34] He has exalted the humble. The hungry he's filled with good things. Whereas the proud will fall like Pharaoh into the depths of the Red Sea.

The humble like Moses will rise to the summit of Mount Sinai. And so again we see this as the consistent message of the Old Testament. This great reversal where those who have it tough in life have everything to look forward to.

The dogs licked the sores on Lazarus' skin in this life. He had nothing in this life. But God exalted him.

God filled him with good things. The humble shepherd boy David. Despised and rejected by his brothers became king. Joseph so hated by his brothers became the prince of Egypt.

Hannah so despised by Penina. Had a son called Samuel. This child in the womb of Mary. Born in a stable of undistinguished and anonymous parents.

[22 : 42] Will spend 30 years unknown. And for those three years of his public ministry. He will be rejected and mocked. Hated. He will be brutally tortured.

He will be utterly humiliated. On the cross. He will be executed on a borrowed cross. Fastened by borrowed nails.

Deered by borrowed laughs. Shrouded in borrowed grave clothes. Buried in a borrowed tomb. Naked he shall have come into this world.

Or naked he'll leave it. But see the great reversal. The type to which all the great reversals of the Bible point. Because this man in Mary's womb.

So cruelly despised and executed and mocked. He'll on the third day rise to new life. The light will triumph over the darkness. And the love of God will be victorious over the hatred of men.

[23 : 44] God will highly exalt him. Give him the name that is above every name. But at the name of this previous anonymous commoner. Jesus of Nazareth.

Every knee shall bow and every can confess. That he is Lord to the glory of God the Father. So you see the magnificence of Mary.

It doesn't just point to the child in her womb. As being Israel's long awaited Messiah. It also sets forth his life story. Out of the weakness and humility of the cross.

Shall be strength and exaltation. And furthermore. His people. So hated and despised today. By the proud and the mighty.

We shall share in his triumph. Like Lazarus. We shall be highly exalted. For us. For us.

[24 : 41] The great reversal of the magnificence. Means honor. And glory. Let me briefly apply this to today's situation in Scotland. Where we're reading at less than 2.5% evangelical Christian.

The media laugh at us every day. Politicians ignore us every day. The masses of the people are suspicious of us every day.

We are an unwelcome inconvenience. We are an unnecessary throwback to the Middle Ages. This is the church of which you have become a part.

We are the backwater of today's Western civilization. We are poor. We are hungry and lowly. We have to lick the sores off our bodies.

And at times you might think. God's church has no future at all in Scotland. The roads aren't black with people coming to church on a Sunday as once they were.

[25 : 46] Our politicians parade their immorality in our faces. And they call what is evil good. And they call what is good evil.

Shall it always be this way? Shall the evil continue to prosper in their wickedness while God's church languishes in ridicule?

Shall it? Shall it? Not so, says the Magnificent. There shall be better days than these. Days when every knee shall bow before King Jesus.

And every tongue confess Him Lord. When even the most evil of our own day and generation, gnashing their teeth, shall acknowledge that Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords.

A great reversal awaits us just as it awaited Jesus on the third day. And this is the message of hope for us. Keep going until that day of reversal.

[26 : 56] Endure. For who knows it might be tomorrow. It's certainly closer today than it was yesterday. Don't give up. Even though you may not say the Magnificent every day, hold it in your heart every day.

The Lord's help is with us. Well, finally and very briefly, the help of God is seen in our praise.

The help of God is seen in our praise. Earlier I used the phrase, the ecstasy of praise, to describe the Magnificent, the expression of a heart bursting with worship of Jesus Christ.

And I guess very few of us are experiencing on a regular basis that ecstasy of praise, which maybe, maybe, says my soul magnifies the Lord. I wonder whether the story of the age-old faithfulness of God to his promises has become old news to us.

That we've stopped being awestruck by his holiness, by the awesomeness of his love. I wonder whether we've forgotten the promises of the great reversal that's demonstrated to us in full color through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, his triumph over death and sin.

[28 : 14] Her song begins, My soul magnifies the Lord, which we may also translate as, My soul praises the greatness of the Lord.

Tell me, what is our reasonable response to the holiness and the help of God? Is it not that we exult in his praise?

That our hearts burst with the worship of Jesus Christ? That if we should withhold our mouths from singing his praises, our hearts will burst within us, like a balloon into which more and more air is being pumped all the time.

We can't take it anymore. We must sing our praises. We must tell of the greatness of the Lord. We must proclaim Christ and his gospel to each other and to the world. Praise.

The whole of our lives shall be fixed on praise. John Calvin said of the Christian life, It is a doctrine of grace and an ethic of gratitude. Why put sin to death in our lives?

[29 : 24] Young man, young woman, why should you strive to be the holiest Christian you can possibly be? Why turn away from these things we know to be wrong?

To the praise and glory of God. Young man, young woman, why should you offer wholeheartedly your service of time, your resources and your dreams and ambitions, yes, even your sacrifice of attendance and a morning service when you'd rather stay in bed.

Why should you offer it all to the church of Jesus Christ? To the praise and the worship of God.

Why bear in your room a savior who will be miscalled, mistreated, and put to death?

To the praise and the glory of God. But then with this I close. Consider with me what the heart of such praise is.

My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. From the lips of the blessed virgin comes forth not just praise, but joyful praise.

[30 : 33] Not robotic, not routine, not dutiful. It's joyful, it's delightful, it's ecstatic, it's enthusiastic praise. The greatest praise we can offer to God is our joy in Christ and his salvation.

Here's the greatest of all praises. Actually, put these two first lines together, praise and joy, and you have the answer to what our primary purpose, our chief end in life really is.

To glorify God and to enjoy him forever. You need a proof text for the first answer to the Shorter Catechism? Listen to Mary as she engages in the ecstasy of praise and the exaltation of joy and all because of Jesus.

No wonder millions of Christians recite the Magnificat every day it's precious to them. Would that it was so precious to us.

But what is of greatest importance is that Jesus and his gospel are precious to us.

[31 : 48] Are they? Are they? Let us pray. We worship you, Lord, for the Magnificat of Mary.

All that animates my soul, all that thrills my soul, is Jesus. That which makes me live is him. And Father, may it be that every one of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the babies to the gray hairs and the no hairs, that every one of us would be able to take the words of the Son upon our lips and even though imperfectly, praise you with our lives, with our faith, with our worship, humbly receiving the gift of salvation through Christ Jesus.

In whose name we pray. Amen.