

Help for the Humbled

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[0 : 00] Well, this morning we'll be looking at this passage in Luke's Gospel that was read earlier. So if you could open your Bibles to Luke chapter 1 on page 1025.

But before we look at God's Word together, let's pray. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. Our Father, we pray that as we read your Word this morning, you would make us wise, you would give us joy, and you would enlighten our eyes.

We pray that we would see the Lord Jesus more clearly, understand who he is more deeply, and as a result, live our lives more thoroughly in service and love and devotion of him.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Just to reassure you as I start this morning, this is not going to be a political sermon, but I just want us to begin by thinking about the idea of monarchy and why it is that for so many people, monarchy is something that is to be resisted or something that's basically seen as irrelevant.

[1 : 42] Now, I know that in an Australian context, there's a particular issue with having your monarch so far away, and coming from Northern Ireland and being a loyal subject of Her Majesty, I wouldn't dream of making any comments on that.

But thinking of monarchy in more general terms, I guess many people today object to it because it seems to go against our fundamental commitment to democracy.

Western countries aren't fighting in Afghanistan to institute a monarchy. They're there to promote and defend democratic rule. Monarchies, especially where it's more than a figurehead, make people nervous because we worry about power being concentrated in one person.

We don't like one person having that much control. We prefer being able to criticize our leaders and to be able to chuck them out when we get tired of them.

Now, as I said, this is not a political sermon, but it's worth remembering that the idea of kingship and kingdom are absolutely vital to the Bible.

[2 : 51] Consistently throughout the Bible, God is described in kingly terms, and Jesus is the ultimate expression of his kingship.

Jesus is God's king. Jesus is God's king. And God expects us to relate to Jesus as a king and a real king, one with ultimate power, not to relate to him as a democratically elected leader who has to perform certain things to win our votes.

And I guess people's nervousness about monarchies parallels their nervousness about God.

People don't like the idea of God, of the Lord Jesus, making demands on us.

A Lord who expects us to relate to him as a subject relates to a king. And so if people do think of God as a king, often it's as a constitutional monarch, a figurehead, one who has no real power.

And I guess that's why people tend to tolerate God at Christmas, because Christmas for most people is about a helpless baby in a manger and warm, fuzzy feelings, not about a king who was born to rule.

[4 : 10] But our passage this morning shows us just how radical, not sentimental, how radical the message of Christmas really is.

It points us to God being born as a king and calling on people to submit to him. Not voting to decide if we'd like him to rule over us for a fixed time period, at the end of which there'll be other options available.

Now it shows us that the Lord Jesus is our ruler, our king. However, it also shows us that his kingship is not one of a despotic ruler who abuses his power for his own gain.

Yes, his rule is absolute, but we'll see that it's also surprisingly subversive. Well, you'll see on the outline I've given you three points, which you might find helpful to follow along.

Our first point is Jesus' royal divinity. Jesus' royal divinity. Our passage starts with an angelic visitation. Just like earlier in the chapter, we had an angel visiting Zechariah.

[5 : 17] Here we have Gabriel visiting Mary, an unmarried virgin in Nazareth. And the angel having reassured Mary, you know, it's not every day that an angel visits you.

He reassures her that she has found favor with God. And he announces to her, verse 31, You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

He'll be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

Now, as Christians, it's very easy for our eyes to be drawn to this description of Jesus being the Son of the Most High. And instantly we think of his deity, Jesus, the Son of God, God incarnate.

And we'll see that Jesus' deity is present in these verses. But in the first instance, we need to recognize that Jesus is being presented as a king here. So in chapter 6, Jesus tells his listeners at one point that if they love their enemies, they will be sons of the Most High.

[6 : 25] So the phrase sons of the Most High itself doesn't necessarily have to refer to Jesus' divinity. And in this section, it's royal language that's being emphasized.

It's royal language. Now, we've already been told that Mary is pledged to be married to Joseph, who just happens to be a descendant of David. And the angel tells Mary that God will give Jesus the throne of his father David.

David was the quintessential king of Israel. And Jesus is seen as standing in his line. But he won't simply be one in the long line of Davidic kings.

No, he will be the ultimate king. He'll be the fulfillment of God's promise to David in the Old Testament. At one point in 2 Samuel 7, God tells David that one of his descendants would rule on his throne forever.

And here the angel confirms that Jesus will be the fulfillment of that promise. And at verse 33, he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

[7 : 31] So the angel, in pointing to the fact that in establishing Jesus as king, showing us that God is keeping his word, fulfilling his promise made to David.

He promised David that his dynasty would never end. But at this point in Israel's history, it's very difficult to see how that would be fulfilled. Ruled by the Romans, with a half-Jewish puppet, King Herod, on the throne.

It was very difficult to see how God would fulfill his promise to Israel of this eternal king. But here the angel tells Mary that Jesus, her son, will sit on David's throne and that he'll rule forever.

His kingdom will never end. Often the wisest political move, it seems, is to go out on top, to leave people wanting more.

It seems to apply in a sporting context as well. You know, these recently have been retirements, people going out on top. And in the political sphere, though, it's quite rare for politicians to be able to go out on top.

[8 : 39] I do have American friends, Democrats, I hasten to add, who have told me that they wished Bill Clinton could have stayed in power longer. But there aren't many rulers, though, who we really miss when they leave office.

Even Winston Churchill, a few months after the end of the Second World War, was voted out of office. The thought of an eternal rule, of a king whose reign will never end, it's hard for us to get our head around it.

We can't sort of associate it with earthly rulers. But the promise of this king in his eternal reign is very different to an earthly king. The promise of an eternal king on David's throne was something that the prophets in the Old Testament reflected on frequently.

And Isaiah thought about it as he uttered the words in chapter 9. These are words that were very familiar at Christmastime. Just listen as I read Isaiah describing this eternal kingdom.

There will be no more gloom for those who are in distress. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

[9 : 50] No more death, no more darkness. Every warrior's boot used in battle, every garment rolled in blood, will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

No more war, no more conflict. Isaiah continues, For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. For the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

Or later on in Isaiah, he again looks forward to this eternal kingdom. A time of justice, of righteousness, of quietness, of confidence.

[10:46] God's people living in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Jesus' kingdom will bring justice, righteousness, salvation, freedom, rest, quiet peace.

He will secure us forever. Jesus, God's King. Our carols celebrate it. Once in Royal David's City, hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King.

Jesus, as God's King, is at the heart of Christmas. Yes, Jesus is the baby in the manger. Yes, he's the saviour of the world.

Yes, he is God born as a man. All those things are right. But here, Luke orientates us especially to the fact that Jesus is King. God born as a king in David's line to rule forever.

But not to bring a despotic, abusive rule. But one of justice, salvation, quiet and peace. The news has been filled recently for different reasons about another royal baby.

[12:00] The happiness of the announcement that Kate and William are expecting. Following, followed by the tragedy of the prank call. People are excited about this royal baby.

But no one's thinking of the baby as one who will one day rule with power. No one is thinking of this baby actually being able to do anything for us. People aren't waiting with hope and expectation.

I remember one Christmas, my wife Emma and I were walking past a nativity scene in a shop window. And Emma happened to notice that the baby in the manger was covered in dust.

Brought out once a year and stored in a dusty cupboard for the rest of the time. No one, it seems, is thinking that this baby will actually be able to do anything.

People aren't waiting with hope and expectation. And it's understandable in one sense. After all, we can't see Jesus anymore. We can't see his throne. We can't, it seems, see any sign of his rule.

[13:02] The world lives on in blissful ignorance of Jesus. Except when we dust him off, if we do that, at Christmas. How do we know that he is God's king?

How do we know that his rule will be forever? Why should we trust the campaign promises that Isaiah and the Old Testament prophets make? Well, we need to remember why Luke has written his gospel.

He tells us in the very opening paragraph that he has carefully investigated everything that he's reporting. He's spoken to eyewitnesses. He's investigated everything thoroughly.

He's writing to give his readers confidence that everything that happened that he records actually happened. And as we read on in our verses, we see that Jesus' conception was not an ordinary conception because Mary was a virgin.

Verse 34, how will this be? Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin. Now, she's not questioning the angel like Zachariah. If you read earlier in the chapter, Zachariah, at the announcement that his wife would carry John the Baptist, Zachariah says, how can I know this will be true?

[14:13] Mary is simply confused. How can she have a child when she has not known Joseph, who she's pledged to be married? Here we see that conception will be a supernatural conception.

And the baby will be no ordinary baby. The angel tells her that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the baby will be created in her by the power of God. Now, we aren't given details here.

And the endless philosophical speculations that have attached themselves to this event are so often just that speculation. The important thing to grasp is that this baby is created in Mary not by human union, but by the power of God.

And he'll be called the Son of God. Now, again, that's a term in the rest of the Bible that can actually be used of human beings. You can read of Israel being described as the Son of God.

You can read of angels being called sons of God or kings. But I think in this context, the fact that this baby is conceived in this miraculous way points to something more significant with Jesus.

[15:19] He's not simply a human king. He is a divine king. God born as a king. Interestingly, when we read on of the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, we read that Elizabeth describes Mary, verse 43, as the mother of my Lord.

Elizabeth recognizes, however dimly or falterantly, that the baby Mary is carrying is the Lord. So what we're being presented here right at the beginning of Luke's gospel is that Jesus is a divine king in the line of David, a king who will live forever, a king whose birth will be supernatural. Luke has given us the evidence. In fact, the whole of this gospel is written as evidence that Jesus is God's king. But here at the beginning, he gives us the evidence of a virgin conception by the power of God.

We can trust that this is no ordinary king because this is no ordinary birth. This is God's divine king who will live and rule forever. Well, secondly, Luke shows us Mary's right response.

Mary shows us how to respond to the announcement of Jesus' royal divinity. Verse 38. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled.

[16:37] Mary submits to the Lord. She describes herself as his servant and she desires that what he has said will come true.

A few verses later in verse 45, Elizabeth describes her as blessed because, verse 45, she has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her. She submits to God. She accepts his word. She believes his promises. Mary is a great picture of faithful Christian discipleship. Now, by the time Mary visits Elizabeth, she's clearly pregnant.

And in some ways, I guess then it would be easier to believe. You know, she is, after all, still a virgin. She knows that the word that the angel has spoken is true. The baby in her womb has been created by the power of God.

But at that first encounter with the angel, when she is told what will happen, her response is not, that's all very nice, but I'll believe it when it happens.

[17:39] Now, even at that first response, she still submits herself to the word from heaven. Now, we live on this side of the birth of Jesus, of his death, his resurrection.

And yet, in some ways, we're remarkably similar to Mary as she stands before that angel. Why should we submit ourselves to Jesus as God's king?

We can't see him. We live in a world that marginalizes him. And yet, just as Mary, we have God's word on the matter. We have this account.

We have this sign, a virgin conception. We have the whole of Luke's gospel. It's descriptions of Jesus, his miracles, his resurrection. We have the fact that Luke has written his gospel to give us certainty.

And so, like Mary, we can and should confidently submit ourselves to God. We can live our lives as his servant. We can trust that everything he's promised will be accomplished, that Jesus will reign forever.

[18:39] However, one day, his reign will be realized. And so, that it's worth living for him, that it's worth devoting our lives to him in his service.

As I mentioned in the opening chapter of this gospel, Luke talks about Zechariah. And in many ways, the account of Zechariah is parallel with the account of Mary.

Both are visited by an angel. Both respond in fear. Both are told not to be afraid. And both are told of a promised birth. Yet, at a crucial point, they differ.

Zechariah responds with doubt. How can I be sure of this? Mary responds in faith. I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.

So, I think what Luke is doing is comparing Zechariah, who is so slow to believe, and Mary, who is so quick to accept the Lord's word, and holding her up as a model. That is how he expects us to respond to the divine kingship of Jesus.

[19:43] May your word be fulfilled. And as he records for us Mary's song, we see that this is no human king with a human agenda. No, he's coming to bring, thirdly, God's subversive salvation.

In verses 46 to 55, Luke gives us this record of the song that Mary sang in response to the news that the angel had brought. That she would carry a king who would become God's eternal king. It's an intensely personal song from the very first lines. My soul glorifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. So, it's worth pausing to ask, in what sense is this song relevant to us?

In what sense can we, if any, take Mary's song on our lips? This passage, often known as the Magnificat, is sung regularly, even weekly, in some churches.

And yet, to make the blindingly obvious point, none of us will ever be in exactly the same position as Mary, as the mother of the Lord. But you'll notice that Mary's song goes on not to be actually overly specific.

[20 : 52] She doesn't reflect on her particular situation as carrying the child who will one day be king. Rather, it's a reflection on God's salvation. She rejoices in God's salvation.

And so, I think one thing that we can say about this song is it shows us it's right to reject the teaching that exalts Mary to the point where she can dispense grace.

You might have come across that idea. You can even see it, or reflections of it, this time of year in Christmas cards that seem to have Mary at the center rather than Jesus.

Or you can go to Italy or other Catholic countries and see religious art that consistently has Mary on the throne in heaven and Jesus on the cross. Now, Mary is like all of us, a sinner who needs salvation.

Yes, God has lifted her from her humble estate, but she doesn't dispense God's grace. She sings about it. All generations will call her blessed not because she can dispense blessing, but because she has received God's blessing, as all of us need to.

[22 : 00] And her song teaches us not so much about her, but about the radical, subversive nature of God's salvation. Human leaders tend to gravitate to the rich and powerful.

In Britain, earlier this year, there was the cash for access scandal, where a junior minister offered close access to the prime minister for a quarter of a million pounds.

So you pay a quarter of a million pounds, you can have dinner with David Cameron and ask all the questions that you want. It's not untypical, I imagine, of leaders across the world. And yet it's not the way that God operates.

He subverts our worldly expectations. He doesn't favor the rich and the privileged. In fact, he overthrows them. And he saves the poor and the humble.

It's there in verse 52. He's brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but he has sent the rich away empty.

[23 : 02] This song, this part of scripture, Mary's song, has been the favorite text of a school of theology called liberation theology. And they've tended to read this through a revolutionary and economic lens.

And so they've used it to argue for kind of revolution in different countries, particularly in South America. But to do that is actually to domesticate this passage.

Because God's salvation is much more radical and subversive than simply to be some form of crypto Marxism. Now, the poor in Luke's gospel are not simply the economic poor.

No, they are the spiritual poor. Because as you read on in Luke's gospel, you'll see that salvation does come to beggars and to widows. It does come to the economically poor.

But it also comes to a Roman military leader, a synagogue ruler, a wealthy tax collector. You see, fundamentally, this is a matter of spiritual wealth.

[24 : 05] The rich and poor, the rich and the proud are those who are self-reliant. And we see that so clearly in verse 51. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

You see that God gets to the heart. It's not simply a matter of economics, but it's a matter of the heart. Now, often the two go together.

The economically powerful are more likely to be self-reliant. But that is not the root issue. The root issue is the heart. Those who are proud and self-reliant are overthrown.

Those who are humble like Mary and recognize their need for a savior are lifted up. It's very easy to identify the outwardly arrogant, the obviously self-dependent, the rich and powerful who ignore and abuse those who are beneath them, the dictator, the ruthless CEO, the unscrupulous politician.

But God's word is actually more penetrating. It's not simply the outwardly and obviously arrogant, but those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

[25 : 24] We may have the facade of humility. But ultimately, if we believe our destiny depends on ourselves, well, God stands against us.

These are very searching words that do call us to examine our hearts. As Luke says, God has scattered, or Mary says, God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

It's worth us examining ourselves at this time of year. Are we proud in our inmost thoughts? Do we think that ultimately our destiny, ultimately our success in this world, ultimately our eternal destiny depends on us?

Contrast Mary, who recognized her humble position, her inability to save herself, her need of a savior, her quiet, confident trust in God's word.

Christmas is a great time for Christians, not just because of the presence, but it's a time when Jesus is on the public agenda.

[26 : 33] Jesus has that higher profile. But even as Christians, we can miss the radical reality of Christmas. As Christians, we're generally very good at making the connection between Christmas and Easter.

You know, we think of Christmas in terms of Easter. We know that Jesus came supremely to die and rise again, to bear God's wrath, to make us one with him.

And that is right. The cross always has to be central to our Christianity. And yet Christmas doesn't simply point us forward to the cross. It points us forward to Jesus' return to the day when his kingdom will be revealed and realized forever.

When Jesus will bring in that wonderful reign of justice, of peace, of quietness, of confidence forever. Christmas calls us to look forward expectantly to that day and to relate to Jesus as the king who will rule over us in righteousness forever.

For our world, the idea of monarchy is something that is generally resisted or seen as irrelevant. For God, his king brings his salvation and calls us all to humble ourselves and to recognize that we need his salvation.

[27 : 53] Let's pray. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has lifted up the humble.

Our Father, we thank you for the example of Mary, your humble servant, who believed your word to her, who waited expectantly for your king and his eternal reign.

Our Father, we repent from our proud hearts. We repent from our self-reliance and thinking that what we do even in this life depends on us, let alone our eternal destiny.

Please help us to wait with the same expectation that Mary had, to turn from our pride, to put our hope in your salvation, the king you have sent, the king who one day will rule forever with peace, justice and salvation.

We praise you for Jesus and we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.