

Help for the Humbled (2)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, that was a rather light-hearted way to start the sermon, but the reason I did it was because, like me, I think many people conflate the whole nativity story, and not many of us actually know which part of the story comes from each gospel. But the reality is that both Matthew and Luke tell the Christmas story in their own unique way, in order to bring out the importance of Jesus' birth. And as that little table showed, there was surprisingly very little overlap between the two accounts. In fact, only the town of Bethlehem is mentioned in both. There might be a couple of other minor details. Matthew, it appears, has written his account from Joseph's perspective.

So four times, an angel is said to appear to Joseph in a dream and directs the events in Jesus' life. On the other hand, Luke appears to be told from Mary's perspective. All the accounts, if you bother to have a look afterwards in Luke, either place Mary at the scene, or else places someone Mary would have known on the scene. So, for example, Zachariah and Elizabeth would probably, being old, not have been alive when Luke came around to interview eyewitnesses for his account.

And so most likely, Luke's account of them would have been based on what Mary told him from her own conversations with them. Also in Luke are three strategically placed poems. So we have Mary's song, which is otherwise known as the Magnificat, in chapter 1 from verses 46 to 56. Then we have Zachariah's prophecy in chapter 1, verses 67 to 80. And then we have a little poem, which is Simeon's prayer in chapter 2 of verses 29 to 32. And together, they shed light on the meaning of the birth of Jesus, the theological significance, if you will, of Jesus' birth. Luke clearly records that Mary, Zachariah, and Simeon all speak under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So their words are actually God's words, and they are God's interpretation of the events surrounding Jesus' birth.

So what we're going to look at tonight is honing in specifically on Mary's song. Mary's song, I think, is important for us to understand Luke's account of the Christmas story, to help us to understand the narrative or the story around her song. We're going to ask, what is Mary's song telling us about the meaning and significance of the Christmas story in Luke?

Well, there are three points as you have it on the outline regarding Mary's prophecy or Mary's song. So we begin looking at the song, and we say that the first thing we can know about Mary's song is that this is a song about God. It is a song of praise to God about God. So Mary says in verse 46 and 47, my soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. And then she goes on to describe what God has done. Every action, if you notice in this poem, is ascribed to God. So God is the one who has been mindful, or in other versions, looked with favor on Mary, verse 48. He's the one that has done great things for her, verse 49. His mercy extends to those who fear him, verse 50. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud, brought down rulers, lifted the humble, filled the hungry, sent the rich away empty, and helped his servant Israel. And so from start to finish, this is a song about God and God's action. And this is actually consistent with the rest of the

[4 : 05] Christmas story. For in that story, God is the one who takes the initiative. He's the one who sends the angel to announce the pregnancy of Elizabeth and Mary. Both of them are miracles. Elizabeth herself says in verse 25 of chapter 1, the Lord has done this for me. As for Mary, the angel says that she will be overshadowed by the power of the Most High. Again, it is the Lord's angel who summons, in chapter 2, the shepherds from the field to visit the baby Jesus. And then later on, Simeon is guided by the Holy Spirit to enter the temple to see the newborn Jesus.

There are also accounts of both John the Baptist and Jesus growing up under the hand of God, or under the favor of God. And so God is the one who is clearly at work in these two chapters in Luke.

But second, God is doing all this work with the aim of saving the humble. And so Mary's song is about the God who saves the humble. Mary calls God her Savior, who is mindful because of her humble state. He is the mighty one, verse 49, the mighty Savior, and she is his humble servant.

He is the one who does great things for her, while she is the one who says great things of him. And then Mary goes on to say that actually she is not the only one.

You see, God does not save people on the basis of how good or how bad they are.

[5 : 57] He doesn't divide the world up into those who have done enough good things and those who haven't. Instead, he measures people according to whether they are proud or humble.

Those who are proud, Mary says, God brings down and scatters and sends away empty. But for the humble, God lifts them up and fills them with good things.

So as a great leveler, the more people try to elevate themselves apart from God, the more they will be brought down. But those who realize their lonely position before God will be lifted up by him.

And the song makes it clear that pride is not just about the outward show. The proud are not only those who drive fast cars, live in big houses, and throw their weight around.

But as verse 51 says, pride extends even into the inmost thoughts of a person. He says, he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

[7 : 03] And so even if no one else can tell, God can and God will. So you may have two people, both with the same position in life, the same bank balances, the same achievements.

But God looks at one and sees a proud person, while he looks at the other and sees a humble person. And the only difference is their attitude towards God.

One fears the Lord, while the other sees no need for him. One sees that all blessings in life come from God, while the other sees that his or her achievements are the work of their own hand.

And you see, the proud may not just be rulers on physical thrones, verse 52, but they could even be rulers on the thrones of their own lives.

They have no fear of God, nor do they serve him. So that's the second point, that God saves those who are humble. But third, Mary's song is about God who saves the humble according to his promise.

[8 : 14] God saves the humble who believe in his promise to them. And so see how God blesses Mary through the words of Elizabeth in verse 45. Just before the song, she says, Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

And nowadays, of course, we seem to have rather low expectations of people keeping their promises. We almost expect people not to keep their word.

Politicians, companies with their advertising, friends with their RSVPs to your parties. And yet, it's still, isn't it, that we decide whether we want to trust people largely on the basis of whether they keep their promises or not.

We determine whether a person is trustworthy based on how faithful they are to their promises. And so it is with God. Mary, in verse 54 and 55, praises God for remembering to save because of his promise.

She says, He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

[9 : 35] Now, in the Bible, God, when he talks about remembering, does not mean that he has forgotten. Rather, when he says he remembers, it is to show that God is acting in accordance or in response to his previous word, to his promise.

And so the salvation that he is now bringing to Mary, to those who fear him, to his servant Israel, in other words, to all his people, those who call him Lord and God, that salvation is the culmination of all the promises that God has made to this point to Mary's ancestors.

So promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, promises made to Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon, promises made through each and every prophet that Israel has ever had.

And so if we look quickly at Zechariah's prophecy, Zechariah says pretty much the same thing. From verse 69, look with me. He says, Praise to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago. Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

[10 : 55] To show mercy to our ancestors. And here, to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham. To rescue us from the land of our enemies and to enable us to fear, serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Now in one sense, we know of course that God has been doing all this throughout history. God has been saving his people because of what he's promised.

So when he brought his people out of Egypt, he remembered his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When he raised up judges in the land of Canaan to rescue them from their enemies, he was doing it because he had made promises to their forefathers.

And then when he had sent them out into exile, he returned them from exile in Babylon because he had promised that he would do that after the period of 70 years was over.

And so in one sense, it's no different this time when God makes his promises to Mary, Zechariah and Simeon. Except that this time, God himself will come down and do the saving.

[12 : 12] For the Christmas story in Luke is about the God who saves the humble according to his promise, but now through Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High.

This then is the salvation to end all salvations. Jesus will reign over Jacob's descendants forever, the angel tells Mary in verse 33, and his kingdom will never end.

So Mary's song, therefore, is actually a song about the child in her womb. It's about the child that will turn out to be her savior. Jesus is the one that will end up scattering the proud, bringing down rulers from their thrones, sending the rich away empty.

Jesus will also lift up the humble and fill the hungry with good things and help his servants, those who fear him, and do great things for them. And now whether we are proud or humble, that will now be judged on the basis of how we respond to Jesus.

Jesus has now been appointed the one to be God's savior, and he will also be the one to judge those who are proud and those who are humble. And so that's why we can see Simeon says to Mary in verse 34 of chapter 2.

- [13 : 37] He says there, if you look with me, this child Jesus is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.

Jesus will now be the yardstick or the person against whom everyone will be measured against as far as their response is concerned.

So the question is for us tonight, where do you stand in the eyes of Jesus? Humble as his servant or proud as one who rejects his rule?

This is now the key test for everyone. Friends, the true significance of the Christmas story in Luke is not one which we hear of much these days, is it?

Not in society at large, that is. Whether it's over the television or in the news, I was particularly aggrieved yesterday when I turned on the TV to Marco Blubl , home for the holidays, and he sang many songs, but none of which mention the name of Jesus.

- [14 : 57] Elmo made an appearance, so did Santa, but not Jesus. We have largely eliminated God from this story of Christmas, haven't we?

That salvation comes from God to those who are humble before him. that this salvation comes only through his son, who gave his life for the world.

And so what we're left with are things like, you know, the importance of spending time with family and friends, staying safe for the holidays, resting well, and perhaps to help the needy around us, to bring a little Christmas cheer to the less fortunate.

Now, don't get me wrong, I think these things have their place and are important, and we should help the poor. But the question is, why are we offering breadcrumbs when God has invited everyone to feast at his table?

Why only bring Christmas cheer when God in Christ has given us everlasting salvation and promised to save those who fear him? I was reading The Age yesterday, and even the atheists have cotton on to this gaping hole.

- [16 : 12] Wendy Squares wrote yesterday in The Age, saying, I am not alone in the struggle to see the joy and rationale my Christian friends assure me exists beyond the mindless cacophony of commercial crapola, feigned frivolity, and glutinous gorging that unfailingly shocks me each December.

Now, of course, Wendy's solution was to, at the end, advise us all to follow Jesus' ethic without Jesus. Jesus, she wants us to have the kingdom without the king.

But Christmas is more than just about those things, isn't it? It's more than about physical comfort. Because you only have to look at Mary, the shepherds, and Simeon. Actually, there was very little Christmas cheer for them that Christmas.

Mary still had to give birth to Jesus, the savior of the world, no less, in a manger. The shepherds returned to their homes in the fields after they visited Jesus.

And Simeon, I guess, he still had to face physical death not long after. But you see, theirs was not a physical reward. All of them came away praising God, radically blessed.

- [17 : 34] Why? Because they had encountered the savior of the world. They had come face to face with the son of the most high, Jesus Christ. Friends, this is the encounter that everyone needs at Christmas and throughout their lives.

This is the real blessing of Christmas to all who fear God. So perhaps that's what you need this Christmas. Or perhaps those you care about need to hear about this.

Well, if that's the case, why don't you ask God to give you that opportunity this year and give you those words to share with someone this Christmas. If you yourself need to encounter Jesus, then please come and speak to me afterwards so that I can talk more about that with you.

But friends, whatever it is, let us take this Christmas story in Luke to the world this Christmas so that people are not just given Christmas cheer, but that they're given the true salvation that comes from Jesus alone.

Savior of the world, Son of the Most High. Let's pray. Father, we know that the world has by and large moved on from Jesus, that they are happy to have the holiday and to have the celebrations, and yet they are not willing to be confronted by the truth of a God who saves the humble according to his promise.

[19 : 13] Lord, we pray that this might not be so for us tonight, and this might not be so for friends and family that we love, and that even though sometimes it is the most difficult to speak with family and friends, that somehow, Lord, you will give us an opportunity to share this great news of Jesus, Savior of the world, to someone this year.

We ask this, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.