

An Expectant Mother's Praise

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Preacher: Rod McArdle

[0 : 00] Please be seated. If you mean, do I see myself as a sinner?

No, I don't. They're the words of Daniel Radcliffe, the 17-year-old extraordinarily popular actor who plays Harry Potter in those series of blockbuster movies.

It's a role, in fact, that he's played since the tender age of 11. And Dan was giving a media interview this week in Australia and the Today Show entertainment reporter Richard Wilkins had just asked Daniel about whether he was a religious person.

Well, I'm not really a religious person, replied Dan. But the Wilkins pursued the line of questioning and so he elaborated. If you mean, do I see myself as a sinner?

No, I don't. I don't think I'll be condemned. So Radcliffe, in the prime of his teenage years, rich, millions of adoring fans, as I cycled through numerous web pages this week, what's his declaration?

[1 : 27] I don't need a saviour. I want to introduce you to another teenager. She's a young Palestinian girl, perhaps mid-teens.

She's not a movie star. There's no multi-multi-million dollar film contracts. Not even really well known in her little region of Galilee. But life's actually going along pretty nicely.

And she's engaged to Joseph. He's also no movie star. But he is of the line of David. So here's Mary. She's living in this state of expectation.

She's waiting for the completion of the Jewish marriage process. For it to be completed at the end of a 12-month betrothal period.

If you like the normal sort of lifestyle for a young Palestinian woman. And it's into this normality there comes the most breathtaking announcement ever made.

[2 : 34] God, through his angel Gabriel, brings news of God's own intervention into humanity. Through her womb.

And it's an intervention friends with cosmic and eternal consequences. Mary, although you're a virgin, you will conceive a baby boy by the Holy Spirit.

And he will be the long-awaited Messiah. Indeed, the very Son of God. It's a profound mystery, isn't it?

God and man. Too big to get your mind around. Certainly too big to get my mind around. But that does not make it any less true.

Jesus Christ, the God-man. The saviour, the deliverer, the rescuer, the redeemer. To save us from what? To deliver us from what?

[3 : 42] The Bible simply answers back from sin. From alienation. From our broken relationship with our eternal creator.

So I want you to see the contrast. Daniel Radcliffe. Rich. considerable power. And on his own admission. And on his own admission.

No need for a saviour. Mary. Well, turn with me to Luke chapter 1 and let's just simply listen to her words.

Verse 46. My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.

Friends. Mary knows that she is a sinner. And she recognises her need for God's grace and for his mercy.

[4 : 49] One way I think about it, if you like, is just simply young Mary is what we might call a believer. I mean, look back at verse 38.

After that extraordinary announcement by Gabriel. After being told that news that may have seen her accused of adultery with all of its consequences.

Of giving birth to a son who some would regard as illegitimate. Look at her response. Mary said to the angel.

Here I am. The servant of the Lord. Let it be with me. How? Let it be with me according to your word.

It's tremendous trust in God, isn't it? Believing God at his word. Believing that what God says he will do. In fact, he will do.

[5 : 46] Friends, as each day of December seems to build with this increasing commercial intensity. As our minds likely increasingly drift towards holiday plans.

I don't want us to miss the big question. The critical question. And it's simply this. How do you see your position before God?

For many, if not most here this morning, the answer will be. I see my position as a sinner saved by God's grace through trusting in Jesus Christ.

There may be some here this morning who said, well, actually, you know, I guess I do see myself as a sinner. I recognise I actually do need salvation.

But I'm still not at a point of being prepared to trust. To trust the totally trustworthy living God.

[6 : 56] Supremely revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. But I wonder if I'm speaking to anyone, perhaps just one person, who says, no, no.

No, I'm actually a good person. I'm certainly not a sinner. And I definitely don't need a saviour.

See, I think for many Aussies, the more successful we become, the richer we become. The very thought of coming before an almighty, holy God as a sinner and pleading for mercy.

That very thought is alien. Indeed, it's a distasteful concept to us. The question is, is that you this morning?

Well, let's continue with this extraordinary journey with Mary. We read in verse 39 that after the visit of the age of Gabriel, she sets out to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth. And it's probably about a four to five day journey away that Mary takes.

[8 : 11] And I want you to capture the scene on this hot, smoky morning, struggling probably as you are with concentration. Senior citizen Elizabeth is herself about six months pregnant.

And just when Zech, that's her husband, Zechariah, just when Zech and her were starting to think about a childless retirement and perhaps looking at the new brochures for the development at Applewood, the same angel Gabriel had announced to Zech.

That not only were they going to have a child, but that this child would be the promised forerunner of the Messiah. So here's Elizabeth.

And as the door opens, as Mary opens the door, walks in, Elizabeth looks very pregnant. And you'd expect in this culture that the younger woman, that the teenage Mary would be the one who would first show honour and respect to the older and wiser woman.

So in this cultural context, it's a bit of a surprise as we see what actually happened in verse 42. Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

[9 : 31] Why has this happened to me? That the mother of my Lord comes to me. See, Elizabeth acknowledges that that tiny little embryo in Mary's womb is in fact the Lord God.

And God confirms the word from Gabriel given to Mary. And he confirms that he does so through the dear old pregnant relative, Elizabeth.

And Elizabeth is clearly speaking as a prophetess. She's filled with the Holy Spirit. And she goes on and says in 44, And as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

And as I said at the eight o'clock service, people seem to connect with this. For us men here, we don't really understand what that feels like. But ladies, you'll have some appreciation for what that is.

And I want you to capture the extraordinary significance of this emotional scene. You've got John the Baptist, the Messiah's forerunner.

[10 : 44] You've got Jesus, the Messiah. And they're brought together by what I've just simply entitled a fetal separate encounter.

Actually, it's the other way around. It's a separate fetal encounter. It's an SFE for those who like acronyms. And immediately, I want you to notice that the superiority of Jesus is highlighted.

The mother of the elder John blesses Jesus' mother. And the fetal John testifies to Jesus' presence by leaping in Elizabeth's womb.

You see, think about it this way. John the Baptist actually begins his prophetic ministry, this ministry of announcing the arrival of the Messiah. He actually commences it when and from where?

From the womb. As I reflected on that this week, the thought that immediately came to my mind was just what a great God we worship. What a powerful God we worship.

[11 : 51] What a loving and gracious God that we worship. That he'd bring about the greatest rescue mission ever. See, it's a rescue mission that a little shadow sort of announcement back immediately after the fall in Genesis 3 and then elaborated on down through the centuries and now being fulfilled.

Being fulfilled how? Elizabeth. In the womb of a humble, believing Palestinian girl. Confirmed by the elderly mother of the promised forerunner of the Messiah.

Elizabeth. I mean, Elizabeth herself such a godly example of simply believing that what God says, he will do.

Oh, God has been most gracious to Elizabeth. And we see at the start of verse 43 that that's what she acknowledges and recognises.

I want you to notice that Mary receives honour on two accounts. Firstly, clearly she's the bearer of the Messiah. So we see that in the end of 42 and 43.

[13 : 02] But I want you to also notice that she receives honour because she is a believer. She simply believed God. She believed his word.

She believed God's ability to fulfil whatever he declares. Look at verse 45. And blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

You see, the humble, poor Palestinian girl is blessed. But not because she has been somehow immaculately conceived herself.

This is one of numerous, totally erroneous teachings of the Roman Catholic Church in relation to Mary. Mary knew that she was a sinner.

Mary knew that she needed God's grace and mercy. Just as that is the case for each one of us.

[14 : 09] But I want to say this. Mary certainly occupies a not-to-be-repeated place in the history of God's dealings with mankind.

So you think of it this way. God became man how many times? Just once. Jesus of Nazareth was born once.

Once through the womb of one woman. There will never be another mother of the Messiah.

Mary was indeed wonderfully, extraordinarily blessed. But not because of her merit. She was blessed because God graciously acted.

He graciously acted in the life of a believer. In the life of someone who simply trusted him. Who trusted his word. This humble, poor, Palestinian girl is blessed because she is a believer.

[15 : 21] And I want you to notice in verse 45 just how that blessing is so clearly stated in general terms. And you'll see just immediately from that the broad application.

You see, it's like this. Blessed is the one. Blessed is you. Blessed is me. Blessed is me. Who believes that there will be the fulfilment of what has been spoken by the Lord.

There is so much declared by God in Scripture, in the Bible. And one declaration of huge importance to each of us this Christmas season is simply, We are all sinners.

That's God's declaration. God also declares that he will judge. But so fortunately, so wonderfully, so graciously, that's not the end of the declaration.

Because God declares that salvation, rescue, deliverance, restored relationship with himself, sins forgiven, is available. Indeed, it's a free gift of God's grace.

[16 : 36] It's a free gift and it's ours as we receive it. As we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And so for all who are here this morning and who know that very reality, I want you to appreciate that we are all, each of us, are unbelievably blessed.

So Dan Radcliffe. I pray that you will respond to the declaration and the conviction of the Holy Spirit that you are a sinner.

And that you will indeed ask the Lord Jesus for mercy. Perhaps you're a Dan.

I mean, you wouldn't necessarily know that if you looked at your bank account. But with that sort of attitude of innate goodness. And if that's the case, then my prayer for you is actually identical.

I pray that you will also respond to the declaration and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. That you are a sinner. And that you need the Lord Jesus Christ's mercy.

[17 : 53] Well, here are the two women. They're together in Elizabeth's house. And what a wonderful occasion it must have been for them. Both of them overawed by God's generosity in their lives.

But especially by God's grace in sending his own son to be the saviour. And as readers, we shouldn't be surprised that Mary, this young lady who's got just such deep and wonderful trust in the Lord God, we shouldn't be surprised that she responds to Elizabeth in one of the great hymns of praise.

One of the great hymns recorded in all of scripture. And as Mary worships in this Thanksgiving psalm, there are echoes and connections with the Old Testament that are just so clear.

The first one that stands out is Hannah's song from 1 Samuel 2. So Hannah, after the birth of little Samuel, she proclaims this. My heart exalts in the Lord.

My strength is exalted in my God. And Mary's song, it also begins with a personal focus. And then it broadens into something with universal dimension.

[19 : 07] So Mary says, my soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God, my saviour. God, the deliverer. God, the rescuer.

And friends, that's simply the message of Christmas. You see, the baby in the manger was God in Christ.

And he came for the explicit purpose of dying for our sins on the cross. To save us from our fallen self-centeredness, our fallen destructiveness, and then rising from the dead to restore us to new life.

See, despite all of fallen mankind's efforts to keep God out, what does he do? He intrudes.

The life of Jesus is bracketed by two seeming impossibilities. A virgin's womb and an empty tomb.

[20 : 18] And Jesus entered our world through a door that was marked no entrance. And Jesus left through a door marked no exit.

God's plan of salvation, his coming, his dying and rising again, is comprehensive in its scope. It is for every man and every woman who trusts in the one true living God.

But more than that, it's for the whole of the physical cosmos. And as Victorians, we should have no problems in realising, especially this weekend, that the creation, the natural order, the natural world, is clearly not in a state of peace.

And one day when Christ returns, we sang about that at the beginning of the service, Jesus comes with clouds descending, see the lamb for sinners slain.

When Jesus returns, and it's an absolute certainty that he will, then it will all be completely renewed. And then indeed, peace, shalom, will extend through the infinity, through the magnificent beauty of the new heaven and the new earth forever.

[21 : 48] Well, Mary is still many months away from the first Christmas, but she knows this critical fact, that God is the rescuer, that God is the deliverer.

Now, she knows this truth, this fact, not just in an intellectual sense, oh, yeah, right, God's the deliverer. She knows it in a personal, experiential sense.

Mary rejoices in the saving action of God on her behalf. And she gives two reasons for a praise, look with me at 48. Firstly, for he's looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely from now on, all generations will call me blessed. Mary praises God, her saviour, because he looked upon her low social status, and yet in love he let her bear the Messiah.

So, friends, it is appropriate to honour Mary, but not because she is innately special, but because she is the model and representative of what it is to experience God's grace.

[23 : 08] The most sacred icons of the Catholic Church, the Black Madonna and the Christ Child, and they're found in Europe's most venerated shrines and cathedrals, and I can bore you with dozens of photos from our recent trip.

And each year, literally hundreds of thousands of pilgrims ritually humble themselves before the image of the Black Mary and her child Jesus at Black Madonna sites that are through France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Portugal, as well as other countries.

And in fact, many Black Madonna statues have the black paint literally kissed off them, kissed off the hands and feet of the statue.

In saying that, in sharing that illustration, let me say the Roman Catholic Church does indeed teach the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

But its encouragement of the veneration of, indeed the worship of Mary, is contrary to all of Scripture.

- [24 : 27] The previous Pope, John Paul II, attributed his escape from death at the hands of a would-be assassin, and he attributed the overthrow of communism in Eastern Europe to the intervention of Mary.

We should pray, and I say this earnestly and sincerely, we should pray that Pope Benedict, that under Pope Benedict, this massive devotion of the last Pope to Mary would not continue.

Well, the second reason for a praise is in 49, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. You see, Mary, again, invokes Old Testament descriptions of God the warrior.

God delivering his people. And then this hymn of praise, it takes on universal dimensions and proportions, and we're reminded, as we look at it, of the songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15, after the Lord had delivered Israel from slavery.

He's shown great strength with his arm. He's scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He's brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

- [25 : 44] He's filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. The great God, the God of reversal, and so wonderfully and appropriately brought to us in song this morning by Nicky.

You see, this is what we see revealed in the Old Testament. And as we were to continue on in Luke's gospel, we see this in Jesus' own ministry.

You see, he brings down the proud, the Pharisees. He lifts up the lowly, the outcasts, the Samaritan woman, the prostitute, the Gentile centurion.

So what's the message for us? If we are proud in the thoughts of our hearts, verse 51, if we take our identity, if we take our security in our riches, verse 53, then we will be sent away empty.

And so the question is simply this. This Christmas season, what is it that you're relying on? Is it yourself?

- [27 : 10] Or is it God's mercy? His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

Friends, if you love the Lord Jesus, I trust that you rejoice in the daily mercies of God. The daily mercies of God that he continues to save you and is transforming you more and more into Christ likeness.

But I trust that you also praise him for just those myriads of, if you like, very basic ways that God shows his mercy in our lives. Basic ways that I feel today like the privilege of being able to be here and share this passage with you.

Having been sick in bed since Tuesday and continuing to pray 3,000 times that the Lord had given me the strength to actually be here and share with you this wonderful passage this morning.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. What is it that we must do this Christmas? Is it a case of, let's be sure that we get the presents put a little earlier this year?

- [28 : 25] A little less Christmas put? I mean, probably both of those, I think are probably good things to do. But it's not the answer. What I must do, what each of us must do, is trust in God's Son and in his mercy.

Well, Mary concludes, he's helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abram and to his descendants forever.

The faithfulness of God, the trustworthiness of God, God always fulfills his word.

The Apostle Paul writes a little time after this and he writes to Christians in Galatia and he declares to them, he says, if you like, listen, this gospel is not some new invention.

Hear what he says to them in Galatians 3. He says, in the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to who?

[29 : 39] To Abraham. Saying, all the Gentiles shall be blessed in you. For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

See, the promises made to Abraham have a very special fulfillment in Mary's son Jesus. We won't look at that, but that's what Paul goes on and speaks about in the remainder of that chapter, Galatians 3.

And these Abrahamic promises that were made literally thousands of years ago, and they were promises that concern people, land, and blessing, these promises will be totally fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth.

Ushered in at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Friends, this great passage, this wonderful passage, is actually not fundamentally, it's not primarily about Mary and Elizabeth.

Wonderful as both of them are, as models of faith. The passage is about the God who keeps his promises.

[30 : 59] The passage is about God's dealing with men and women, men and women, like you and me.

You see, for those who trust him, for those who trust his word, this is what God promises. He promises rescue, deliverance, salvation, and blessing.

That's his promise. But for those who look to themselves, who proudly stick their little nose or big nose up into the air and say, I don't need a saviour, then this is God's promise.

God promises to scatter the proud. He promises to send away empty-handed all who are relying on, who are trusting in anything, something, or someone other than the mighty one.

And if you think about that statement I've just made, ask yourself, how could it be otherwise? Because we're speaking about trusting in the eternal creator, the king.

[32 : 24] And as I continue to reflect on this week, I guess the question that just kept nagging in the back of my mind was simply this. Why would we stubbornly keep going down a route of rebellion?

Why would we do it? Because in turning, in repenting, there's nothing to lose.

Well, nothing to lose except one thing, our lostness. God's promise is certain and it is gracious.

God promises mercy for all who fear him, who revere him, who worship him. That's his promise. You can count on it.

And so this Christmas, as you, I'm sure, will hear numerous times the Christmas story, perhaps as you watch a nativity play again, my prayer is that everyone who's gathered here this morning will know without any shadow of a doubt that you, each one of you, and Mary, share the greatest blessing of all.

[33 : 41] That you actually both belong to God's family. And that you belong to God's family because you've placed your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.