

Blessed of a Humble Faith

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Preacher: Mark Chew

- [0 : 0 0] Well, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the second episode of our Advent mini-series, The Child Who is God. Last week, in our opening episode, God unveiled to His angel Gabriel His great plan of salvation for this world.
- God will save the world and through the birth of a child who is God. Now, this plan wasn't announced on social media or through the nightly evening news.
- There was no press conference in Jerusalem, but God came to two lowly people. One, an old man, Zechariah, who had lived for many years with the shame of not having a child.
- The other, a single young woman, Mary, a small-town girl without wealth or status, one powerless individual in the sea of humanity.
- And yet, it's to them that God chose to break His silence, 400 years' silence to His people. It's to these lowly people that God delivers the news that would change the world.
- [1 : 1 2] God will re-establish David's throne just as He promised. And this child of Mary will sit on the throne as king forever. Now, some of you will recall when there was another Mary, one Mary Donaldson of Tasmania.
- She became Princess Mary of Denmark. Or you might remember Kate Middleton, another commoner who married Prince William. Now, both are now mothers of future kings.
- And there was a lot of buzz at the time, wasn't there? And they were the envy of all young eligible women. That two commoners could become A-class royals.
- But I have to say that even they can't compare with our Mary in the Bible. Because she's not just the mother of a future king. No, she's the mother of the Son of God as well.
- And yet, despite her exaltation, what do we find her doing next? Well, in tonight's second episode, beginning at verse 39, we find that Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country to visit her relative Elizabeth.
- [2 : 2 6] Really? Of all the words that Gabriel uttered, the ones that Mary latches on to, weren't the ones of her own blessing or honor. No, they were actually news of Elizabeth's pregnancy.
- That's exactly what she did. That's such a selfless and humble reaction, don't you think? She's not thinking of her own great blessing, but of Elizabeth's. She knew, I'm sure, of Elizabeth's grief, those long years of barrenness.
- But that grief has turned to joy, and Mary hurries to join her so that she can rejoice with her. Now, the word hurried in that text suggests that, you know, she didn't have time to linger in Nazareth.
- She did not tell others of her own news or celebrate. No, she actually hurried there at the first chance. And I have to say that her actions too show faith. For really, all she had to go on was actually Gabriel's word.
- She couldn't, like, you know, call Elizabeth to find out, is that true? No SMS. After all, Elizabeth herself, as we read last week, she was actually in seclusion.

[3 : 34] And her poor hubby, Zechariah, well, he was literally lost for words, wasn't he? And for all we know, and I think verse 58 actually hints at this, for all we know, even their neighbors and their relatives didn't know.

So Mary was taking a risk, really. What if Gabriel's word wasn't true, and she went all the way there? If you look at the slide, this wasn't a casual day trip, you know.

As the map shows, if we can get to it, yep. Nazareth is actually in the north, in Galilee, and Judea is actually down south. She had to actually go through or around Samaritan country to get from Nazareth to Judea.

So this took courage as well as faith for a young girl like Mary. Incidentally, Mary does take the trip again, doesn't she, nine months later, when she's fully pregnant with Joseph taking her to Bethlehem for the census.

So this was one, you know, well-traveled young girl, wasn't she? But even in these two verses, I think we see the quality of Mary's faith and of her humility.

[4 : 45] Now, of course, Gabriel's words were true. And so as she greets Elizabeth at the house, we read in verse 41, if you look with me, it says, Now, because Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, these words that we've just read are actually inspired words given to her by God.

She's God's mouthpiece, just as Gabriel was. And so too are the actions of her baby. John may not be able to speak yet, but he's communicating, isn't he?

Prophecy even, you might say, with his feet. And so in word and deed, both John and his mom recognize Mary's blessedness. They exalt her.

First, because of the child she carries by God's will. But secondly, because of her faith. Verse 45 is the key here. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will fulfill her promises to her.

And these words actually mirror Mary's own from last week in verse 38. Remember how she said, May his word to me, may God's word, the Lord's word to me be fulfilled.

[6 : 23] So yes, Mary is blessed as the mother of God's son. But what pleases God more, I believe, is actually her trust in his promises.

Her faith, you see, has vindicated God's choice of her. She models what the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 11 and verse 6. So on the screen, the writer says this, And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

By faith, Mary believed God's promises, and in humility, Mary submits to them. She becomes the Lord's servant. Verse 38. So that the Lord may fulfill his promises through her.

Now on hearing all this lofty praise of her, Mary now speaks, or perhaps she sings. This is often called Mary's song. And Mary too is filled with the Holy Spirit.

As we saw last week in verse 35, the Spirit has come on her. And so again, Mary is God's spokesperson. And the words of her song are inspired by God. It explains theologically what she has just experienced.

[7 : 40] Now I wonder whether you've just noticed this, but it's amazing, isn't it? As we've read the last two weeks, these verses, have you noticed that apart from the angel Gabriel, all the inspired words so far in the gospel have come from these two women?

In a culture where the voices of women are ignored or discounted, God has chosen the lowly to be his mouthpieces. These two women are given the honor of being the first in Luke's gospel to speak on God's behalf.

He has bypassed kings and rulers. He's bypassed the rich and mighty. He's even bypassed Zechariah, that learned priest. He had his chance, but he was denied, wasn't he?

Because of his unbelief. Instead, it's these two women of humble faith that God turns to as his spokesperson. And as we read Mary's song, we'll see that this is the theme that actually lies at the heart of her song.

So let's look at the song. Mary's song itself is divided into three parts, as the second section of the outline indicates. In the first, verses 46 to 49, Mary turns our attention to the God who blesses.

[9 : 00] Mary has just been exalted and praised by Elizabeth's words. But what she chooses to do is actually to redirect our attention to God instead. Here was another sign of her humility.

And the point she makes is this. It's a wonderful response, isn't it?

Something that I wish I could emulate all the time. That when blessings come, Mary turns our gaze quickly from the blessings themselves to the giver of them, to God.

Her joy is turned quickly to thanksgiving and praise for God. But Mary has a further reason to turn our attention to God because she realizes that actually she's not anyone special.

She's not unique. Rather, this is how God deals with all who are like her. God's blessing comes on all who fear him. And so this is the gist of the second part of Mary's song, verses 50 to 53.

[10 : 07] Let me read it for you. It says, His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. 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. Now, some people mistakenly think that God is in the business of blessing everyone.

That, you know, a loving God like him, he surely can't bear to judge anyone. Whatever their conduct, whatever their attitude towards him, that God would bless them regardless.

But that's not how the Bible presents it, is it? And Mary's song is pretty clear on this. There is a line between those that God blesses and those that God judges.

Karen read for us Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel, and that says the same thing. And if you read the other parts of the Bible, they all have similar themes, including Jesus' parables.

[11 : 14] Remember all his parables where he divides people into sheep and goats, wheat and weeds, good fish and bad fish. So even here, we see a great separation.

But the divide isn't what we commonly expect, isn't what we commonly see in this world. For God doesn't distinguish between gender, or race, or wealth, or education.

Instead, the dividing line is between those who are humble and those who are proud. Those who are humble like Mary, God blesses, and those who are proud, God judges. I don't think for a moment that the proud are restricted to, you know, rulers and celebrities, or politicians who brag about how great they are.

No names being mentioned. No, as Mary says in verse 51, God scatters those who are, read it, proud in their inmost thoughts. That is anyone who thinks highly of themselves, whether they show it or not.

So the proud is anyone who is self-reliant, self-centered, self-seeking. The other ones who think, I have no need of God. The other ones who think, no, I don't need his help.

[12 : 29] It's a little like how I was one Christmas. We had just bought a trampoline for our girls, one like this. Actually, truth be told, the grandparents bought it for them for Christmas.

But I was too stingy to pay for that extra bit to get it assembled. So it was divot, flat packed. And even though the instructions said, it's a two-person job, I decided I would do it alone.

I didn't need anyone's help. And so on Christmas Eve, when the girls were out to dinner, I set about frantically trying to put it up so that I could surprise them when they got home late that night.

Now, truth be told, it really needed two people. Okay, you can see that. But I pressed on anyway. I wasn't going to admit defeat even when I knew that it was very difficult.

Even when I had to, you know, I sort of did it all the way nearly up to the end and then I realized I put the springs at the bottom wrong and so I had to dismantle everything to redo it again. But the thing wasn't going to get the better of me.

[13 : 31] No. I didn't need help. I'm going to get it done. So I kept going. The sun set. The mozzies came out to feed on me. But eventually, I got it done. I was so proud of myself that I even had to jump on it at 11 p.m. in the dark.

It was good fun. But I was soon brought down from my high horse. Why? Because I spent the next four weeks on my back. I had inflamed my discs while, you know, doing it.

You see, I paid for my pride, didn't I? I prayed for the fact that I felt I didn't need any help. I paid for my own self-reliance. Well, Mary says that eventually, everything catches up with the proud.

Just like me. God opposes them because they're not in the right condition to actually receive God's blessing. They reject God's authority, so why would they seek His blessing?

Now, we often, you know, I think we often see pride easily in others, so we scoff at those at school or at work, keep talking up themselves.

[14 : 45] But I want to ask, what about that person in the mirror? Is he or she self-seeking, self-centered, and self-reliant as well?

Do we pray often because we know that we need God's help? Or do we think that we're so much better than others? Or do we become angry when, you know, we don't get what we think we deserve?

Do we take pride in our promotion at work or our good atas, whatever they may be, our spiritual gifts even? Friends, being humble doesn't mean that we're, you know, we think, oh, we're useless at everything.

No. Being humble means that we are sober in our judgment of ourselves, that we realize that actually we're not self-sufficient. Now, look closely with me, though, at the verses again, and we also see another thing, that although being humble is right and necessary, it's actually not enough to be blessed by God.

You see, Mary says in verse 48 that she's blessed because she's a humble servant of the Lord. Not just humble, but a humble servant of the Lord. In verse 50, God's mercy extends to those who fear Him.

[16 : 02] That is, those who worship Him as God. And in verse 54, God helps Israel, His servants. In other words, while being humble is necessary because without it we don't see our need for God, what is also required is that then we reach out and take hold of God's promises by faith.

We need to fear Him. We need to serve Him in order to get to that blessing. It's as though our humble hearts are the fertile soil for God to plant His word, His promises.

But once planted, we still need faith in order for those blessings to arise from it. that's why I changed the title of the sermon. In the outline, it says, the blessedness of a humble faith.

If you look at the front page of the newsletter, which was an earlier version, it says, the blessedness of humility, which on reflection, I decided wasn't good enough. We need not just humility, but a humble faith.

And that's why Mary concludes the song with the third part in verses 54 and 55 to show us what to base our faith on. So verse 54, He has helped His servant Israel remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as He said or promised to our fathers.

[17 : 17] You see, Mary realized that her blessings and those of Israel's come from God's promises to them. God is making good His word to them. Some of these promises we saw last week, didn't we, from 2 Samuel or Isaiah, but there are many others to Abraham in Genesis, for instance, or Moses in Exodus or even Joshua when He went into the land of Canaan.

Mary is blessed because she believed the promises to her. But these promises aren't made in isolation. She knows that they are made because of God's past promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The word remember here is actually really rich in meaning. verse 54 and 55. It doesn't imply that somehow God's forgotten and suddenly He's just remembered His promises and He's going to do something about it.

Rather, the word remember here as in the rest of the Bible signifies His commitment to His past promises. So, for example, in Exodus, when God heard the cries of His people in Egypt and rescued them from slavery, we read that it's because God remembered His covenant.

He remembered and He acted out of His commitment to His promises. And so now, as God brings His plan of salvation to pass and brings salvation history to a climax, God blesses Mary and chooses her to bear the child who is God because He remembers His covenant.

[18 : 52] And so Mary in her song is encouraging all of us like her to trust in that God who remembers and who makes those promises to see in His promises our hope of salvation and the means of our exaltation.

Those who are proud will never get to this point, right? Because God's promises mean nothing to them. But those who are humble then look to God to bless them. Like Mary, they direct their humble faith toward God and fear and serve Him.

And so I just want to end tonight with two points of application. First, I'd like us to consider and even rejoice in our humble state. Let us recognize that actually we're not at the center of the universe.

I know it sort of sounds ridiculous when you say it, but we often act as though we were. that the world revolves around us, that God even revolves around us. Yes, humility is hard to swallow.

When we see others get ahead of us at work or school, when our efforts go unnoticed, our talents are overlooked, humility is hard when those things happen to us.

[20 : 08] It's hard when we don't seem to be able to rise above our circumstances and we feel like we're stuck and powerless. But friends, let me encourage you to learn to rejoice anyway, to ask God to help you to rejoice.

Why? Because it's from these situations that God comes to raise us up. It's in these situations that God's mighty deeds are performed for us.

It's the same with us as a church. I mean, increasingly, as Christians, we are being marginalized, aren't we? We are being mocked where our faith is ridiculed in the public square. We're laughed at for still believing in God's word.

But let us take heart, brothers and sisters, because it's from these situations that God will come and raise us up and help us. Sure, the high and mighty, they'll have their time for a while, but let us not be concerned or bothered by that.

Let us keep fearing and serving Him because God will lift up His church in due time. I'm absolutely sure of that. And I'm sure of that because that is the same thing that happened with Jesus, our Savior.

[21 : 19] I mean, that's what Christmas is all about, isn't it? Everywhere we look in the Gospel, the story of Christmas is one of the Son of God who in nature, being in very nature God, didn't consider equality something to be grasped.

Rather, He made Himself nothing. He humbled Himself and He came as a helpless babe. He was born in a dirty manger. He was born to a family in Nazareth, West Nazareth, to a humble carpenter.

And then He was rejected by the powerful Romans and Jews of the day. And finally, He subjected Himself to a humiliating death, death on the cross. And yet, God remembered His promises to Abraham.

He exalted Jesus and made Him King of Israel forever. And right now, He rules at God's right hand over all creation. He humbled Himself and God exalted Him.

And so, this is the path that we should follow too. We should rejoice in our own humble state, fearing and serving Him. Let us live out our faith in God's promises.

[22 : 27] As I was reflecting this week on this passage, I mean, this is full of ironies, this whole couple of chapters, what God is doing.

But one of the great ironies is this. As I said before, the proud so badly want to be at the center of history, don't they? To leave their mark on this earth.

But you see, it's Mary who with her humble faith, who fears and serves God, she's the one that finds herself at the center of history, isn't she?

She's the one that's caught up in God's cosmic purpose for the world. True, she's still a small player compared to the child, Jesus.

He will make history. But she's right there, isn't she? Right where the action is. And friends, in the course of history, there are many Christians that have given up earthly ambitions for Christ.

[23 : 27] You know, some of them could have been world-renowned singers, eminent lawyers, world-class, whatever, athletes, name it, whatever. They could have made lots of money. They could have been rich and powerful.

They could have been acclaimed by the world as, you know, change makers. That's a real fancy title that, you know, now people think it's really cool to have, right? To be a change maker. But instead, these people chose to serve God.

They chose to follow a path of humility. Now, some of these people we don't even know because they might have ended their life in obscurity, you know, preaching the gospel to some unknown tribe in some far-flung corner of the world.

But friends, let me tell you this. God will exalt them. In fact, God may have already exalted them on the last day. When we get to heaven, we will find them exalted because they've done their bit for God's purpose.

They've decided to humble themselves in order to serve and fear the Lord. And so, you might be wondering tonight where your life's all going. You know, what God's going to make of it, if anything.

[24 : 35] Well, friends, take heart, fear, and serve the Lord. Listen, read closely His promises, believe, and walk in them. And then God will show you in due time how you will serve Him.

and He will raise you up for that purpose and bless you for that. Now, on the other hand, even though you may think you are a Christian, if, however, you see no need for God, that is, you're pretty self-reliant, you're self-satisfied, or you desire is to seek your own goals and desires in life.

Well, let me assure you, God's promises will be fulfilled in you too, but you wouldn't be happy when that happens, for God will bring you low.

Whatever fame and fortune you think you may have, it will turn out to be worthless. Nothing you've achieved will come for anything. This is the warning of Mary's song, isn't it?

It's both an encouragement, but also a warning. An encouragement to the humble, but a warning to the proud. The good news is, it's not too late.

[25 : 48] You can still humble yourself today and turn to God in faith. So, we're going to actually end by having a time of confession. Now, it may be that you're not, you are falling and serving the Lord, and so maybe this particular warning is not for you.

But then again, it may be that you've decided you're going to go your own way. Even as a Christian, you say, I'm going to make the decisions in my life, and I will pursue my dreams.

Well, whatever the case may be, I want to ask us to just pause for a moment to just look at our own lives, look at the person in the mirror, as it were, and if we need to, come before God in confession.

We'll do that for a short while, and then there will be some words so that we can say the corporate confession together. All right, let's pray. Friends, let's pray together.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we admit we have gone our own way, not loving you as we ought, not loving our neighbors as ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have failed to do.

[27 : 07] We deserve your condemnation. Father, forgive us. Help us to love you and our neighbor, and to live for your honor through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. And friends, this is God's promise, a promise of assurance of forgiveness. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. Amen.