

My Soul Magnifies the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] You'll find it helpful if you open your Bibles to Psalm 34, which is on page 490, around the middle of the Bible. As a child growing up in Africa, we had an extraordinarily aristocratic cat, who we named Magnificat.

And it was a bit of a surprise to me in my teen years to discover that that name did not belong to our household. And that it was more than a name. Now, you know that there are four songs, four hymns in Luke's Gospel as Jesus arrives in the world telling the miracle of his birth.

And the best known and the best love is the Song of Mary. And it's called the Magnificat because of the first word in the Latin translation, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

And it has been sung every day for about 1500 years or more in the service of Vespers. And it's been sung every evening that evening prayer happens in the Anglican Church.

But it is much more than a well-worn segue in a service. As the reality of what God is doing dawns on Mary, the same spirit who conceived the child in her womb now moves upon her and she opens her mouth and speaks.

[1 : 3 1] And it is, in my view, simply the most remarkable tapestry woven of Old Testament texts that we have. Every line refers to the Old Testament in some shape or form, mostly to the Psalms, sometimes allusions, sometimes direct quotes.

And each of the words and each of the allusions open doors for us and draw us into the same salvation that Mary is experiencing.

One of my favourite paintings at home is painted by my mother. And it's a painting of the beach about 50 yards from where they live. And in the middle of the Vancouver winter, obviously, I often have a look at that painting.

And each brushstroke is like a container of meaning for me. And my hope is that the Song of Mary will be like that for us this Advent as we approach the coming of Christ.

We're going to look at some of the major brushstrokes in the Song of Mary and what stands behind them. As Mary refers to a psalm, it's not because she can't think of the next good thing to say.

[2 : 4 5] She does it deliberately. And her heart and her mind are so obviously saturated with the Psalms that the Psalms are shining meaning on what's happening for her with the coming of Christ.

And she realises that the coming of Christ is shining meaning back on how to understand the Psalms. And each week we're going to look at some of the basic building blocks in Mary's Song and as we begin the Song of Mary, she says, My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

She's quoting from Psalm 34 verse 3 where we read, O magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt his name together.

This is one of a group of psalms written by King David as King Saul pursues him to kill him. And well, you look at the title, it gives you a little hint.

A Psalm of David when he feigned madness before Abimelech so that he drove him out and he went away. The story comes from 1 Samuel 21 and it has a kind of Shakespearean feel to it.

- [3 : 53] David is pursued right out of Israel and he finds himself in the land of the Philistines. But there's a problem. He'd been so successful as a warrior in his early days against the Philistines that now he's easily recognised.

And there is a song on the local Philistine radio station which went something like this, Saul has killed his thousands but David his ten thousands. So he is recognised.

And he is drawn to the king and in a moment of desperation he pretends to be completely insane. And every room he goes into he gets very interested in the doors and he starts carving on the doors and he lets dribble, fall down his beard.

And the king looks at him and says, I have enough madmen in my court, thank you very much. And he lets him go. As I imagine many in political office are tempted to do.

And David draws back into Israel and there are a group of his followers gather around him and that is where he writes this psalm. And it's very interesting. If you read on in Samuel, just after this, he still doesn't know what God will do.

- [5 : 07] He does not know if he will have, if this will be a happy outcome for him. And yet because of this deliverance, he writes this wonderful psalm.

And what the psalm does is it looks suffering squarely in the face. You see verse 19? Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

There is no concealing or hiding or minimizing the reality of affliction and suffering. And what the psalm do is instead of giving us an easy couple of steps to face suffering, what it does is it brings our suffering into the presence of God where our suffering receives boundaries.

And I say that because the psalm is an acrostic. Each new verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And there are only 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

No more, no less. In other words, there is a beginning to evil and there is an end to evil. It is a coverable territory.

- [6 : 21] Sorrow and suffering are not infinite. And I know in the experience we feel isolated and exhausted and debilitated. And often we are tempted to feel that this is endless and bottomless.

And the psalm says that's false. All our suffering is contained within the boundaries that God sets. The very shape of the psalm teaches us this.

And as we read through it, I hope you picked up that there are three sections. The first speaks in the past. The middle section speaks in the present.

And the final section speaks about our future. So let's just look quickly at them. Firstly, the delight of past deliverance, verses 1 to 6. Perhaps we should read these together.

I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth. I will bless the Lord.

- [7 : 49] Thank you. You see the two-sidedness of the experience of the believer. On the one side, suffering, affliction, trouble.

They are part of the life of the people of God. There is no guarantee anywhere in the Bible that we will avoid suffering. And the suffering in this psalm is deep and it is wide.

It is emotional, it is physical and it is spiritual. And when David uses that phrase in verse 19, many of the afflictions of the righteous, the word doesn't just mean a lot in number, but it means they are broad and very painful.

But there is another reality right beside that, placed unashamedly in its face, and that is God is our deliverer. And David wants to make this absolutely comprehensive and total.

So in verse 4 he says that God delivered me from all my fears, and in verse 6 he saved me out of all my troubles, and he says it again in verse 17 and verse 19. The fact that we suffer and the fact that we cry out to God and the fact that our lives seem to be full of troubles does not mean that God is a failure or that your faith is defective.

[9 : 04] In fact, the very opposite is true. It is in that situation where we are facing genuine difficulty and we cry out to God, it is in that situation that God operates his deliverance.

He does not promise how and he does not promise when, and he often answers our prayers in ways which we, well, we didn't tell him to do it that way.

But the promise here is that he hears and delivers. And I think many of us struggle with what to expect from God and what to pray for.

And the psalm and the scriptures encourage us to lay out before him all our afflictions and all our troubles and to pray for all the desires of our hearts.

And if we do not have the answer we feel that we need, it does not mean that God has abandoned us and it does not mean that God loves us any less. It means that he wishes for us to look to him as our deliverer.

[10 : 07] And when the answer does come and when deliverance comes to us, don't keep it to yourself. Rejoice and give thanks.

And that is what the Song of Mary and that's what this psalm are telling us. You see, when Mary says, Oh, magnify the Lord with me, the word magnify, it's not really a word we use today so much.

It literally means enlarges. My soul enlarges the Lord. And of course you can't do that.

But what Mary is saying is, she's just been told by an angel that the child she is about to bear is the son of the Most High, that he's going to take the throne of David forever and ever and ever.

And she feels that her heart and her mind are just not big enough to contain her praise so she enlarges the Lord. And we find through Mary's song that she keeps on wanting to draw us into the same experience.

[11 : 09] And we find exactly the same dynamic in Psalm 34. Part of magnifying the Lord is wanting other people to do it with you. That's why verse 3 says, Oh, magnify the Lord with me.

I know some of us in the congregation have looked to God and prayed to God and been heard by God. And we need to tell one another. And if you want to know what to say to one another, the psalm's very helpful.

Say to one another, Oh, magnify the Lord with me. Or say, look to him and be radiant, as it says in verse 5. Or in verse 8, taste and see that the Lord is good.

I think this is a vital lesson for God's people in the midst of adversity. We need to look back.

Not out of nostalgia. Not because the past was the glory days. But because God has constantly and consistently answered our prayers and given us his deliverance.

[12 : 13] And we need to take delight in that together. Yesterday I understand that's exactly what the women's quiet day did.

As two women bore witness to how God had answered their prayers. the delight of past deliverance. Well, we move into the middle section to the goodness of God in the present.

Let's read verses 8, 9 and 10 together, shall we? Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good. Happy.

Happy. Happy. Happy. Happy. Some of us spend a great deal of our life trying to keep God at a safe distance.

despite every indication we still entertain the nasty suspicion that God cannot really be trusted that we can't really fully accept his word for us because he's not really good and David says you cannot really see how good God is until you taste him he is not just the God who is watching from a distance or who just answers our prayers from the safety of heaven he is near to each of us and he is good and if we don't know his goodness despite our sluggishness hard heartedness and our ingratitude God himself comes to us and says make a trial make a genuine experiential trial of my goodness and you will see and the difficulty for us is so much of the reality of our life with God cannot really be put into words there are things that must be loved before we realise how worthy of love they are there are things that we must believe before we realise how worthy of belief they are and when it comes to the sheer goodness of God it is not it just won't work to stand at a distance and hope to understand and experience his goodness

[14 : 43] I think these are words of stunning condescension that the creator of love and light the source of truth and beauty and all that is good should bow to his creatures we who love his gifts more than we love him and offer us to offer himself to us in this way so that we might have the thing that we really ultimately need you cannot know the reality and truth of God's goodness except by experience you don't know how sweet honey is until you taste it you cannot experience the goodness of God until you take him into every fibre of who you are faith is the soul's taste and you know that the taste or the hunger that is in the hearts of each of us it can't be filled by ourselves or by the gifts that God gives us it can only be filled by him and one of the measures by which we understand whether we are tasting the goodness of God is how discontent we are with the life that God has given us for the measure of our discontent is the measure of how little we taste him and tasting him means opening our hearts and minds to him and particularly opening our hearts and minds to his teaching and with the apostle Peter said like newborn babies long for the pure spiritual milk that you might grow up by it to salvation for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord tasting God fearing him pleasing him past deliverance the present goodness of God and finally in the third section the security of future salvation

I was driving to church this morning and I was sitting at the lights half asleep and someone hit me from behind very gently and so I pulled over and got out and it was a woman from the congregation who was not going to church and it woke me up and do you not feel that these texts taste and see that the Lord is good is just a bump from behind that we need to wake up and taste who God is let's move to the future shall we verses 17 to 19 why don't we read those verses together when the righteous cry for help the Lord hears and delivers them out of their trouble the Lord is near to the broken heart here again is the two-sidedness of the Christian experience on the one side we are afflicted and poor broken hearted crushed in spirit on the other hand we are hopelessly enthusiastic about the future it's one of the most annoying things about the Christian faith this divergence and the reason is because of God he delivers us out of all our troubles so magnify the Lord with me and the two things the crushed in spirit and the broken heartedness and the enthusiasm in what God is doing always go together you cannot have one without the other you cannot boast in God be glad and rejoice with a proud and self-righteous heart you can't it's impossible it's impossible to take joy in God when you want to be God and praise arises from the great relief and realization that you don't have to play God but the true God hears our prayers his eyes are towards us his ears are towards us he is near us to save us out of all trouble and he is good that's why I think verse 18 is so important see we hear a great deal today about brokenness and you can understand

I think why we have embraced this idea it's a great way to express the fact that there is something profoundly wrong with every single one of us that we are powerless to fix and it alleviates us of a heavy burden of trying to sit in judgment on one another because we're all broken but by itself it is a half truth it reduces my resistance and my unbelief and my defiance towards God and diminishes it until just how it affects me and it makes me the point of reference and me the centre of gravity and the Bible says that is not the issue the issue is not so much how I feel about myself or whether I have it all together but how I relate to God and how I relate to those around me as Neil told the children earlier today when the Bible uses the language of brokenness it is almost always in relation to God you remember the verse just a couple of psalms later when King David says the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit a broken and contrite heart

O God you will not despise this is the basic consciousness of our guilt before God and it is directed towards Him it's the recognition that we don't live two dimensionally but three dimensionally and instead of trying to justify and excuse and write off and hide our sins or dissemble as we say in our service we say against you and against you only have I sinned this is at the heart of the miracle of believing faith that the very God whom we have rejected and suspected and treated with contempt takes us under the protection of His own forgiving righteousness and that is why what delights God is not a million sacrifices it's not filling the world with religious expression nor is it filling the world with individuals who live moral lives but have no place for Him it is a broken spirit and a contrite heart a heart that is broken in relation to God it is a heart that has recognised that its own high view of itself is impossibly ridiculous to maintain it's a heart that has asked God for a softening and a new heart and a clean heart and a newly created heart a heart that will sorrow over the things that God sorrows and love the things that God loves and a heart that wants to taste

God Himself and this is salvation and it is comprehensive in its breadth and its width and its depth and its length and it's supposed to embrace every dimension of our lives past and present and future and it looks back on the many afflictions through which we have come and it knows the delight of deliverance and it says this the Lord heard my cry and saved me out of my troubles I will bless the Lord I will praise Him I will boast in Him I'll be glad in Him O magnify the Lord with me and it looks around at our present difficulties and our present troubles and knowing the goodness of God it determines to seek the Lord and take refuge in Him and to fear Him and turn away from evil and to cry out to the Lord with a broken spirit and taste the goodness of God and it looks to the future suffering which all of us will walk through before we die with the security of knowing that the angel of the Lord encamps around about us that the eyes of the Lord and the ears of the Lord are towards us and that in every single one of our circumstances the Lord is near and that though the afflictions be many they are limited by the hand of God and one day

[23 : 04] God will deliver us out of all of them and I think it is here in the last verses of the psalm where we look beyond this world to that final day to the God who raises the dead you see the last verse the Lord redeems the life of his servants none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned and we know that in fulfilling that promise for us the Redeemer himself entered into our affliction in a way that we can barely comprehend and in giving his life to redeem us he became our refuge so that we can say there is no condemnation for all those who are in Christ Jesus and we have much more reason than King David and even more reason than Mary herself to sing my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour

Amen