

Luke 1:39-56 - God-Centered Joy

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me to Luke chapter 1, Luke 1. Last Sunday we listened as Gabriel delivered messages, good news of God's gracious blessing to two different people, to the priest Zechariah and the young virgin Mary.

Both of them, Gabriel says, are going to have children, surprisingly. And as we continue reading today, their exciting stories overlap as Mary travels to see her relative Elizabeth, who is Zechariah's wife.

We're going to look today at the account of their joyful visit together and Mary's famous song of joy often called the Magnificat, a beautiful song with so much good for us.

Now hear God's word as I read it at Luke 1 and verse 39. In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to a town in Judah.

[1 : 14] And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. And Mary said, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior.

For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.

[2 : 23] He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. The grass withers, the flowers fade, but these words of our God will stand forever.

Pray with me and then we'll talk about them together. Father, thank you for your word. It is what we need this morning. Even in the places where we don't know our need, you will speak to us.

And so we ask, Father, by your spirit, speak clearly to our hearts. Give us eyes to see and to understand. Ears to hear your words.

And hearts that would be eager to know more of you and to know more of what you would have for us. Father, teach us, we ask, for Jesus' sake.

[3 : 29] Amen. When I was a kid, I loved birthdays. Birthdays were a big deal in our home growing up. You really got whatever you wanted for a day.

The birthday boy had everything focused on me. My friends. My presence. My favorite dinner that night.

My favorite activities. My favorite desserts. I still remember some of my parties and the joy I felt with everything centered on me.

Everyone singing to me. Everyone celebrating me. It was so much fun. Birthdays were great, great days. I can also remember the feeling of the day after the party.

You may know this feeling. But everyone had left. It wasn't my birthday anymore. Nothing special was planned. No one called to talk to me.

[4 : 26] And I had to eat broccoli again. All around a pretty disappointing description for an extrovert who loves desserts. Just by yourself eating broccoli.

It's really, really disappointing. I think the reason though that I remember that disappointing feeling so well is that I still feel it regularly.

When the excitement of a joyful day fades. Perhaps it's still on the day after my birthday when the Facebook activity fades from 100 plus notifications on my birthday to complete silence the next day. Maybe it's the day after a big promotion at work. Maybe it's the day after cheering your team to victory in the big game.

Maybe it's the drive away from the beach at the end of vacation. That hits a little close to home this time of year. It's August and we're in school and back. Maybe you know that feeling driving away after a great week of vacation.

[5 : 32] Things that seem so joyful in the moment and yet the joy fades so quickly. That's the problem with joy that's centered in our experiences, isn't it?

It fades so quickly. The vacation ends. The team loses next week. The friend lets me down. Work and life carry on as usual and the joy fades.

The Gospel of Luke that we've just begun to study has a lot to say about joy. It's even in the title of our sermon series. It's one of the themes of Luke. What true joy is, where it comes from, why we should have it and so forth.

And it's a theme that's featured as early as these first two chapters where we encounter several joyful songs. And it's evident here in the passage we read this morning. First, the baby John leaps for joy in his mother's womb.

Six months in utero, John, yet to have a name given to him, but he has actions and intentionality and emotions ascribed to him.

[6 : 44] Elizabeth expresses joy upon seeing Mary exclaiming with a loud cry. Verse 42. And then Mary breaks into joyful song where she says her spirit rejoices in God, her Savior.

Verse 47. I want us to look for a few minutes at Mary's famous song, using words of saints like Hannah that she's borrowing from.

And watch where that joy comes from. Because we're going to see a real contrast from the quickly fading joy that I look for and then lose. We'll see in this song that contemplating God's great deeds for us leads to our great joy in Him.

That is that it's contemplating God's greatness, His great deeds for us that produces that true and lasting joy.

Before we join Mary in contemplating God's great deeds for a few minutes, let's notice what it is that prompts her joyful song. It's Elizabeth's encouraging greeting, isn't it, that sets Mary's heart off singing.

[7 : 55] In particular, Elizabeth points her to the hope and promises of God. She says, fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. This is what's so exciting, Mary.

That you believe there would be a fulfillment of what God promised you. I don't know for sure, but just imagine Mary's emotions after a multi-day trip to visit her relatives.

Time to think and wonder. Perhaps there was no one at home who even understood her story of an angel. That seemed strange.

Perhaps skepticism even creeping in herself. Maybe this is not as big a deal as I'm making it out to be. Likely still not knowing how this unforeseen turn of events will impact her fiancé and in the course of the rest of her life.

A young, newly pregnant teenager shows up on the doorstep of aging Elizabeth. Finally, someone who will understand.

[9 : 02] And she gets pointed to God. You might have expected Elizabeth to want to talk about her own miracle growing inside of her. As excited as she certainly was about that.

But she understands the greater work that God has done in Mary. And so she points Mary to trust God's promises. And that sparks Mary's joyful and timeless song.

Side note. What a great privilege we have to do that for each other. To point each other to God and to His promises. It's not just older ladies with young pregnant moms.

Although that's a beautiful thing when you're able to do that. But men across generations and others who share similar life experiences and know the same Lord. That's what you heard Barnes talking about just a few minutes ago. Are you looking for people you can point to God? Are you looking to visit those you know will point you to God?

[10:06] What a needed thing in all of our lives, right? To have people around us like that. And how beautiful when God's people point each other to Him.

Join a small group. That's the point of the past. No, that's not the point. But it's a good thing to do and a beautiful opportunity to do that for each other. But back to the story.

Mary being pointed to God all of a sudden breaks into song. And she opens with the famous line there in verse 46.

My soul magnifies the Lord. My soul magnifies the Lord. The first word there, magnificat. It's where the name comes from.

It's how it starts. My soul magnifies the Lord. To magnify something, of course, means to make it bigger. But kids, think with me for just a minute.

[11:02] Have you ever used a magnifying glass before? When you use a magnifying glass, say, to look at a bug maybe, does it actually make the bug bigger? Does the bug get bigger if you take the glass away?

Do you have a really big bug in your hand? No. What does it do? The magnifying glass makes the bug look bigger to you. In your eyes, in your perception, the bug grows and gets bigger.

That's what the word magnify means here. It's not Mary actually making God greater, but rather Mary reveling in God's greatness and seeing Him as bigger in her own eyes.

It's what the psalmist means in Psalm 34, 3 when he says, Oh, magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt His name together.

There are many ways that we magnify God, but it's a particular focus when we gather together corporately for worship to make the name of God great together.

[12:05] We gather together to point each other to God's greatness that we would have our hearts encouraged and refocused on Him. And the result of that is deep joy for us when we see that reality.

Mary's second line, verse 47, not only does she call for magnifying the Lord, but she says, My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Together, these two lines mean that Mary is joyful with her whole being. Every part of her is joyful in God. All of her is focused on God's greatness and finding joy in God her Savior.

Notice that the joy is not the kind we talked about at the beginning that is focused on our own experiences. There's a lot that she could talk about that she's going through.

But rather a deeper, more abiding joy focused on God rejoicing in God her Savior. It's one of the unexpected realities of our relationship with God that His glory, His greatness, and our joy, our satisfaction in Him go hand in hand.

[13:23] They're connected to each other. And I say that's strange or unexpected because usually glory going to me increases my joy, right?

Isn't that your experience? Isn't that the way we love to have it? And glory going to anyone else doesn't really help. I'm not really happy about that all the time. But Mary, being the good Presbyterian teen that she apparently was, knows her catechism.

What is man's chief end? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. That both of those things go together.

His glory and our joy are connected to each other. When we see Him as great, we have deep satisfaction. Our hearts are properly centered and rightly focused.

Theologian Andrew Murray writes, It is the faith that continually finds its joy in the sufficiency of an almighty Savior that makes the soul strong and glad.

[14:30] Finding joy in how great He is. If you want to think more on that dynamic in the Christian life, read anything John Piper has ever written. Seriously.

True joy. Joy that won't fade the next day because it flows from a mighty Savior who doesn't change, who's always there.

Don't you want that kind of joy? Where God is consistently great, so is our joy in Him. So Mary does that in this song.

Her heart is focused on God and His great deeds. She's apparently been contemplating who He is and what He's done. So she contemplates God's great deeds line after line.

The song is magnifying God the way she started it. And God consistently is the one who's active. Doing things that cause Mary to praise Him because of what He does.

[15 : 33] Let's look at just a few of them together. We're going to contemplate God's great deeds. First, God looks. Verse 48.

For He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. God looks. We talked last week about how easy it would have been for Mary to feel overlooked.

In the middle of nowhere, Nazareth, seemingly unimportant. And apparently Mary has been contemplating as she journeys to see Elizabeth, the remarkable reality that God looks.

That God notices her. Even her. He always sees. He always sees. The eyes of the Lord are in every place keeping watch on the evil and the good.

He always sees. And it seems to be especially those who are overlooked by others whom He sees. And to whom His seeing them is really, really good news.

[16 : 40] To Mary in her humble estate that He looks at. To Hagar when in Genesis 16, Sarah has run her maid servant off into the wilderness.

And God shows up and Hagar calls Him El Roy, the God who sees. And she says, because He's taking care of me in my moment of distress, He sees me.

You know that feeling of being overlooked, of no one noticing. I picture a young boy getting ready for a game of football and teams are being picked.

And he's saying, pick me. Pick me. And then his hand goes up. I'm over here. Pick me. And the captains keep scanning right over him to the other kids until he's the last one left.

Feels like he's not even there. It's as if he doesn't exist. But God looks. God notices. Sometimes I just need to know that someone notices.

[17 : 45] Right? Does anyone realize how hard this is? Does anyone see how unfair this is? Do they not see how hard I'm trying? God looks.

God notices. God sees. God sees. When our girls were really young and first went to gymnastics, we would leave them in the gymnastics room by themselves.

That was a little frightening sometimes to them. And the parents would have to go away upstairs to a room where you could watch the kids. And so we'd tell them, you can look up there and see us.

And sure enough, we'd see them look up anxiously every few minutes, just checking to see. Waiting to see. Was anybody watching? And we'd wave and they'd be good for a few more minutes.

They could go back and get to work. Mary is contemplating the greatness of God in always looking. Let me ask you this morning, where do you need to know that he is looking?

[18 : 46] Where do you feel that no one else notices? I really want you to go ahead and think of a particular situation. I want us actually to contemplate this morning, not to talk about contemplating, but to spend a few moments contemplating and write it down.

I'm going to drink some water so that you have to write while I drink. Where do you need to know that God notices? Think of something and write it down. You may be fearful.

You may be tired. You may feel overlooked. Glance up. See your Father watching. What a great God.

He always looks. I know it's awkward when the preacher pauses for a long time during the sermon. We're going to practice.

We'll get to do it four times, so you're a quarter of the way through. When God looks, though, it's not just that he looks. It's not idle looking that he's just gazing around.

[20 : 10] God also delivers. That's what Mary's rejoicing in when she continues in the song. Look at verse 49. He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arms, scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God delivers.

When God is described as the mighty one, he who is mighty, whenever that description of God is there, it's almost always God is the king rescuing his people.

That's the picture that you should have in mind. And when you look down to verse 51, where he's got a strong arm, where he's shown strength with his arm, that's a reference to the exodus.

That's how God's people described what he did in bringing them out of slavery in Egypt, his great deliverance of his people. And Mary says he's doing it again.

[21 : 10] That's what's happening here in me and with us. For her and for all his people, for generations to come, a deliverance is happening. So with all of her being, she rejoices in God, her Savior.

The one who delivers her. That's what she's rejoicing in. Sneak peek, that word identifying God as Savior is used only one other time in the Gospel of Luke.

And it's coming soon, and it is full of significance. So stay tuned. We'll talk about it then. But this morning, contemplate God's saving work for just a minute.

How has he rescued and delivered in your life? Where have you needed help? This is the writing part. When have you been too weak and needed his strength?

Where were you stuck and he showed up to deliver you? Write something down again. Write something down again. God looks on his people in need.

[22 : 26] And in his good time, he shows up to deliver. Whether it's out of a bad situation in Egypt or out of a bad condition in sin. He delivers.

What a great God that he saves. Thirdly, we see that God satisfies. Look at verse 52.

He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty.

God satisfies. God satisfies. God satisfies. He fills. In fact, the point in these verses is that only God truly satisfies, truly fills us.

And we see this through the contrast in these verses between those who are rich or mighty. Who think they found satisfaction in their own wealth and power.

[23 : 26] Who find that there's no satisfaction no matter how hard they look for it there. And the contrast between those and the hungry and humble like Mary.

Who acknowledge their emptiness and find God to be the one who truly fills, who always satisfies. Mary didn't have much in worldly terms, did she?

But she received God's grace and found Him to be everything she needed. That she was filled by Him. I think commentator James Edwards describes this reality in the Magnificat beautifully.

Just listen for a second. He says, He continues, God does not turn away from want and oppression, but toward both in compassion and rescuing intervention.

In most religions, a meeting with God requires the low to ascend high. Sinners to become saints. The Magnificat reverses all protocol and expectations.

[24 : 46] God who is high becomes low. I told you Jesus was going to turn things upside down. He's doing it even before He's born. God who is high becomes low.

I love that. God meets with the lowly. So are you lowly? Are you hungry?

Are you needy? Write down an example of where you have really felt that emptiness and need to be filled.

Some of the things we feel, we feel right now. Some of those are needs we can still remember from years ago.

And remember how God has met those needs. God promises that He is the one who always satisfies as we look to Him. What a great God we serve.

[25 : 57] Finally, as we contemplate God's great deeds, we see that God remembers. Verse 54.

He has helped His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to His offspring forever.

The verb here, I'm not that bad at grammar. It's actually help. But the point is that God in sending a child to Mary is remembering, is keeping His gracious promises all the way back to Abraham.

His mercy in condescending to meet lowly Israel, we've already read, is promised through the generations. And then God's faithfulness to those promises is what Mary celebrates here.

God remembers His people and His promises to them. So the point is that He has shown Himself trustworthy. Perhaps you have a friend in your life you can always count on, who always remembers you, never forgets your birthday, never forgets to pray for you, never forgets the things that are heavy on your heart.

What a gift that is. Isn't that a great gift? It's a glimpse for you of God who remembers. Is there a place in your life you sometimes feel forgotten by God?

[27 : 27] Is there a particular promise of God that you need to know He remembers this morning? See if you can write one down. I'll help.

The promise of His presence, perhaps. The promise of rest, true rest for your soul. The promise of cleansing and forgiveness, that your darkest sin will be washed away white as snow in the blood of Jesus.

The promise of His unfailing love, that nothing you or anyone else can do can separate you from your Father who loves you. Write one of those promises down.

He remembers them all. The baby sent to Mary is further evidence that He faithfully keeps His promises to His people. That He always remembers His beloved people.

What a great God He is. That's the primary focus of this passage. It's the greatness of God. Not so much how to be joyful.

[28 : 45] But it is as we contemplate God's greatness. It's remarkable to me that the deep joy and satisfaction we so long for, we keep searching for it in ourselves, in our own experiences, don't we?

Take just a minute to look back over what you've written down of God's great deeds. Look at what He's done. I hope that just slowing down to contemplate again this morning God's great deeds for you is even already beginning to produce a deep joy in Him that will outlast the self-focused joys we chase after.

But it's not, of course, just a quick fix to hear it in a sermon and pause for a few seconds one time.

This is a way of life. That day by day we center our lives on His greatness and glory.

And as a result we do find that lasting joy. One of the ways that works is that when God always remembers us, we can actually forget ourselves.

In addition to learning her catechism, apparently Mary had already also read this great book by Tim Keller called *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*.

[30 : 07] Look how small that is. You could read that, couldn't you? Yeah, I read that. *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*. You should read it. It's really a book about gospel humility, which Keller explains is not thinking less of yourself as though you are worthless, but rather thinking of yourself less.

In other words, people like us who naturally filter every event and every situation in life through the lens of how it impacts me, we can be freed from that oppressive obsession with self, always having to figure out, I wonder how this is going to impact me and how I'm going to look and what they're going to think about me.

We can be freed from that by the love and acceptance of God to live a life of freedom and joy.

Here's how this deep God-centered joy comes out in this passage.

Just to look back through the ways we've seen God act. Because God looks, we don't have to focus on ourselves or work to draw attention to ourselves.

Rather, we can joyfully look to God in the interests of others. Because God delivers, we don't have to rescue ourselves. All that exhausting effort spent getting nowhere and fixing our own problems can instead be joyful rest in the salvation provided by God.

[31 : 36] Because God satisfies, we don't have to search for our own fulfillment. I think this self-focused search for fulfillment may be the greatest thief of joy in most of our lives.

Don't you know what it feels like running from one fix to the next? Just trying to find, what's it going to be that fills me up? That finally dulls the pain and soothes the ache and satisfies deeply and doesn't go away the next day?

It's so depressing to keep feeling empty at the end of every relationship. Every effort, even every success. And the next day, the emptiness comes.

If you're there today and you feel that emptiness, Jesus offers you the lasting joy of admitting your hunger, your emptiness, and being filled by Him always.

Finally, because God remembers, we don't have to trust in ourselves. There's someone else we can trust.

[32 : 44] We can take a deep breath. We can depend on one who never fails and never forgets us. We can, in that sense, forget ourselves and lose ourselves in the greatness of our glorious God and we're going to be taken care of.

What a joy it is to be able to live that way. What else? Who else besides a glorious God like that could enable a self-obsessed birthday boy who still loves what I loved when I was a kid?

Like me. Someone like you. To find joy beyond parties and presents. To find joy beyond everything in my life going the way I want it, when I want it, and otherwise I'm crushed.

No one else but our great God who always remembers us. My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.

May that be true of each of us as we continue to contemplate our great God throughout this day.

Pray with me. Father, we have only scratched the surface.

[34 : 05] Only seen the tip of the iceberg in these moments this morning of all of the ways that you have loved us, provided for us, met our needs, calmed our hearts.

But we're thankful even for what we've already seen. Would you create time for us? Would you give calm in our hearts to continue contemplating your great deeds for us?

Might you call us back to yourself time and again, not just this afternoon, but day by day and moment by moment, that we would begin to filter through a different lens than just me, but through a gratitude and a joy of what God has done.

Father, I'm far from that. My self-filter is very strong. We need you to come and work in our hearts by your spirit that we would make much of you rather than much of ourselves.

That Jesus and his salvation and his deliverance for us would be the thing that causes songs of joy to well up in our hearts. Holy Spirit, do that.

[35 : 23] You love to do it. Do it in each of us. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

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