MARY’S SONG OF PRAISE

Luke 1:39–56

Key Verses: 1:46–47

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior…’”

When are you happiest? Is it when you’ve eaten a good meal, or had a good night’s sleep? Maybe it’s when you’ve received some extra money? Or when something you’ve wanted for a long time finally happens? In today’s passage we see a person named Mary singing a song of praise because she’s so happy. What was it that made her like this? What does her song mean to us? We want to learn more about God through these verses, and about how to live as his people. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verses 39,40. It’s a dramatic moment. As we saw in last week’s passage, the angel Gabriel just told Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of Jesus, the Son of God, the promised Messiah who would rule God’s kingdom forever. Mary wondered how she would have a baby, because she was not yet married to her fiancé Joseph. So the angel told her about her relative Elizabeth, who’d been barren well into her old age, but now had conceived a son. By faith Mary accepted the word of the angel. But she wanted to make sure she wasn’t hallucinating. So she quickly makes a journey to Elizabeth’s home, about 80 miles away. As we learned, at this time Mary is most likely very young, about 12 or 13 years old. It’s a really challenging time for her, and, a tough journey to make. But she really needs help. So she seeks it not from just anyone she feels good about, but from a person based on the angel’s word.

What happens when she gets to Zechariah and Elizabeth’s home? Look at verse 41. As we saw earlier, Elizabeth is quite old (7,18)—it’s dangerous to be pregnant. For the past five months she’s kept herself hidden, being careful to protect both her health and the baby’s (25). But now with Mary visiting her, she suddenly experiences her baby leaping in her womb. That could have been scary. But it says here that simultaneously, she’s filled with the Holy Spirit. Probably it’s related to her baby being filled with the Spirit, too (15b). God in his sovereign will initiated Elizabeth’s being filled with the Holy Spirit right at this moment, to help her know what to say to Mary (12:12). This incident tells us that instead of being overly concerned about our physical condition, perhaps we should be more concerned about whether or not we’re filled with the Holy Spirit (Lk4:1; Ac4:8,31; 6:3,5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9,52; Eph5:18).

So when she’s filled with the Holy Spirit, what does Elizabeth do? Look at verse 42. It may be that Elizabeth is so old, she’s not sure who this young girl is who’s come to her house. She hasn’t seen her, but only heard the voice of her greeting. But through the Holy Spirit, she knows exactly who it is and even what’s happened to this girl. She knows Mary is pregnant. Most likely she also knows Mary isn’t married yet. But she knows it’s the greatest blessing any woman could ever have, because Mary is carrying the Savior, God’s Son. To Mary, Elizabeth’s reaction to her visit is the first confirmation that what the angel told her is true. For many people, being in Mary’s situation would cause lots of anxiety—what are people going to think? How am I going to get through this? Why is God asking such a hard thing of me? But Elizabeth speaks out with a loud cry, “Mary, you are so *blessed!*” It may not feel like a blessing, but spiritually speaking, it is.

What else does Elizabeth say? Look at verse 43. It’s such a great reversal. Elizabeth is elderly, deserving great honor; Mary is just a young girl with so little life experience. But Elizabeth says Mary is so much more blessed than she is; she even calls her “the mother of my Lord.” To Mary, it’s a second confirmation that what the angel told her is true. Elizabeth says more. Look at verse 44. This explains how she realizes what’s going on. It was when the baby in her womb leaped. To Elizabeth, it was a clear sign that the young woman greeting her was carrying the one for whom her own baby would prepare the way. Through the Spirit, Elizabeth interpreted that her baby’s movement was not a leap of trouble, but a leap “for joy.” Instead of being heavy and gloomy, worrying about old age, health, and what people are thinking, it’s time to rejoice. Simply speaking, the work of God’s Spirit in her baby, John, and even more, in her visitor Mary, filled elderly Elizabeth with such great joy. Seeing God’s work still fills us with joy.

Elizabeth’s final words to Mary are important. Read verse 45. With wisdom from the Spirit, Elizabeth gives Mary the best words of counsel: believe that what the Lord told her through the angel would be fulfilled. Believing that all God’s words will come true is the best blessing. It’s not obtaining good human conditions. It’s not even just having cute babies. It’s believing God’s word—especially all it says about Jesus—that’s what makes people blessed. It was true for Mary, true for Elizabeth, and true for anyone who believes. This must have resonated with the people who first started believing in Jesus. After siding with Jesus, humanly their circumstances worsened. Their faith made them odd; their family members misunderstood them; they even faced persecution. But believing what the testimony of God’s word says about Jesus really did bring them into the greatest spiritual blessings. It’s still true for us. So how does Mary respond? In verses 46–55 she bursts into a song of praise. Some songs are meaningless, some are sad. But this song is in deep gratitude to God. And this one says a lot about God. What should we learn here?

**First**, rejoicing in God (46,47). Read verses 46,47. When Mary heard Elizabeth’s words, everything clicked. Initially she had accepted what God was asking, but in reality it was hard. Who knew what would happen to her engagement to Joseph? Who knew if she could ever live normally again? At this moment in her young life, her whole future was in jeopardy. In her society, at bare minimum she would forever have to face people’s critical eyes for getting pregnant before marriage. But when she got to Elizabeth’s house, she found that everything the angel had told her was true. Old Elizabeth was pregnant! What’s more, Elizabeth called her “the mother of my Lord,” and the most blessed among all women! Elizabeth point blank told her to keep on believing that what the Lord had spoken to her would be fulfilled. Elizabeth’s words and especially her joy are a total game-changer. Mary can fully appreciate what God has done in choosing her for this task. So she says, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Though she’s so blessed, Mary gives all the glory to God. Mary finds the source of real joy in God himself. Mary truly has experienced God as her Savior.

The creation story in Genesis tells us that God blesses us in so many ways in order to make us happy. But the problem is, these blessings can turn into idols, and we forget about the source of all blessing: God himself. Abraham learned this lesson. He really wanted the blessing of a son. But through all his failures, in the end he experienced that it was God who was the real blessing, the one he loved the most. Moses really wanted to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt and bring them to the promised land. But he realized that without God’s presence with them, even freedom and the promised land would be no blessing. David worked hard to unite the 12 tribes of Israel into one unified kingdom. But without the blessing of God’s presence at the center of their nation, he realized it would all be meaningless. The Bible tells us again and again we need to learn to rejoice in God himself. In Romans 5 Paul says that as we learn to rejoice in God and his grace to us, we even rejoice in our sufferings. We live in such a materialistic and hedonistic culture. The meaning of Christmas gets totally lost. But Mary’s song tells us we can be filled with joy through God himself, even if we hold nothing at all in our hands. This Christmas may God help us experience him as our Savior and find real and lasting joy in him.

**Second**, “he has looked on” me (48). Look at verse 48. Mary is trying to wrap her head around what God has done. So she mentions her “humble estate.” In Greek it literally says her “humiliation.” This same word is repeated again in verse 52. God takes a most humiliated person and makes that person the most blessed in all the world. It’s mind-boggling. Mary also uses the expression “he has looked on me.” When she got pregnant Elizabeth used the same expression, “he looked on me” (25). Mary was an ordinary young girl; she had no special qualifications to be chosen as the mother of the Son of God. But God “looked on her.”

In our sinful nature we like to have people look at us. We want them to see how good we look, how hard we worked, or in some way how great we are. For some people it’s an obsession. We try to find our identity and value in others’ recognition. But it’s so unstable, and it never satisfies. In the real world we’re mostly overlooked and ignored. So we hear the expression, “Nobody cares!” It’s painful to find out that we were only a second or third choice, or not even chosen at all. But we find real joy when we realize that God looks on us. God notices, loves and chooses us, not because we’re that great, but only by his grace.

**Third**, God’s character (49,50). Read verses 49,50. We see three words about God here: God is mighty, holy and merciful. This great God is the one who did such great things for Mary. But it wasn’t just for her. She’s not just focused on how blessed she is. She broadens it out in verse 50: “And his mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.” This is real humility: to fear God. When we learn to live before him in genuine awe and reverence, despite our sins, he shows us his mercy. God’s mercy is an important theme in Luke’s Gospel. Of the ten times it’s mentioned, it’s repeated twice in this passage and five times in this chapter. Mary didn’t feel like she deserved being used by God. She wasn’t “entitled.” She felt like an unworthy servant. She tasted God’s mercy. She knew it wasn’t just for her, but for all who fear him in every generation.

**Fourth**, how God’s mercy works (51–55). This part of the song shows us two ways God’s mercy works. Read verses 51–53. In his mercy God deals with the proud, the mighty and the rich, who tend to be abusive. In his mercy he also elevates the humble and the hungry, who tend to be abused. In these ways God expresses his mercy through his justice. As we receive his mercy, we need to treat people the way God does. We need to care for the humble and the hungry.

Read verses 54–55. God also shows his mercy by how he kept his covenant with Abraham. Abraham’s descendants were not easy to deal with. They turned to idols and were unfaithful to God. It turned into so many painful stories. But through it all, God remembered his mercy and kept his promises. Luke mentions Abraham more than any other Gospel writer—14 times. He wants us to know that God sent Jesus to all people through Abraham’s descendants and in fulfilment of his promises to Abraham.

Read verses 46–47 again. This Christmas may God help us experience his saving grace and learn how to really rejoice in him. May he give us a renewed vision for his mercy in Jesus to reach all kinds of humble people.