Rock Valley Bible Church (www.rvbc.cc)

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December 18, 2016 by Steve Brandon

The Song of Mary

Luke 1:46-55

1. Praise (verses 46-47)
2. Humility (verses 48-49)
3. Mercy (verses 50-55)

There are various portions of Scripture that are so famous and central to the teaching of the Bible that they have their own names. For instance, "The Ten Commandments" is the name given to Exodus 20:1-17. The "Shema" is the name given to Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which begins, "Hear O Israel." The "Beatitudes" is the name of the first portion of the Sermon on the Mount, (Matt. 5:3-12). The "Lord's Prayer" is the prayer that our Lord taught us in Matt. 6:9-13. The "Olivet Discourse" is the name given to the discussion Jesus had with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, shortly before His death (as recorded in Matthew 24-25). The "Upper Room Discourse" is the name given to John 13-17, which is the discussion that Jesus had with disciples during the time of the Passover. First Corinthians 13 is known as "The Love Chapter."

We have the opportunity to look this morning at a passage with a name. It's found in Luke 1:46-55. It's called, "The Magnificat." Its name comes from first word of verse 46 in Latin: "Magnificat animum mea Dominum." It is the song of praise to God that Mary uttered.

At Rock Valley Bible Church this Christmas season, we are looking at "The Songs of Christmas"--that is, the four songs found in Luke chapters 1 and 2. They are the songs of Zechariah, Mary, the angels, and Simeon. The proper term for these songs are "canticles," that is, a hymn or song of praise from someplace other than the Psalms. Last week we looked at Zechariah's song. This week, we are looking at Mary's song.

Let's begin by reading our text, in Luke chapter 1.

Luke 1:46-55
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;
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."

Now, to catch the context of these words, we must go back to verse 26. This is where Mary enters the scene. We read ...

Luke 1:26
In the sixth month ...

Here, he is speaking of the sixth month of the pregnancy of Elizabeth....

Luke 1:26-29
In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

It just isn't every day that an angel shows up at your doorstep. Mary was filled with perplexity, as is only to be expected. She didn't know that this angelic visitation meant. Rather, she was confused, perplexed and troubled at this statement.

Furthermore, Mary was filled with fear. We know this because of what Gabriel, the angel, said next, ...

> Luke 1:30
> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

When angels appear, it is a fearful thing. When an angel appeared to Zachariah, we are told that "fear fell upon him" (Luke 1:12). When the angels appeared to the shepherd in the fields, we read that they were "filled with great fear." In all of these cases, the first thing out of the angel's mouth was, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1: 13; 2:10). They, like Mary were also afraid. Continuing the story, we hear the angel's explanation of His visitation.

> Luke 1:31-37
> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Now, if anything sounds fanciful, this does. Mary is not married. She had never known a man sexually. She was not a woman of privilege or noble birth. Rather, she was of humble circumstances, destined to be the wife of a carpenter, not a king or a powerful politician, who might be able to help her son rise to prominence.

Yet, she is told that she will bear a Son, who will become king. Not just any king, but an eternal king of a kingdom without end. He will be the greatest king that ever lived, as his kingdom will continue forever (verse 33).

It has been said in jest that "every Jewish mother thinks that her first Son is God." But the angel wasn't joking when he told these things to Mary. He was in dead earnest. He said, "for nothing will be impossible with God" (verse 37).

It is right at this moment in time that Mary was confronted with these incredible predictions. She could either embrace them in faith. Or, she could reject them as fairy tale. She could believe in the words of the God of the impossible or not. Her response demonstrates her faith in the God of the impossible. Verse 38 gives us Mary's words, ...

> Luke 1:38
> And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Mary was a woman of tremendous faith, who entirely submitted herself to the plans of God. At this point, she certainly didn't understand all of the implications of this angelic message. But her heart was one of entire submission. She willingly presented herself as a servant of the Lord. In effect, she was saying, "My life is the Lord's. I willingly give it to Him. However He calls me to serve Him, I will follow as a willing servant to His will."

Mary's words were an expression of her tremendous faith before God. It paved the way for the difficulties that would come in her life. She would face the pain of false accusation from her husband to be, who was planning on putting her away secretly for her supposed unfaithfulness (Matt. 1:19). She would face the pain of false accusation from the society at large, who supposed that Jesus was born of fornication (John 8:41). As the mother of Jesus, her life would be filled with difficulty.

Remember when she presented Jesus to Simeon in the temple? He said, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of man in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 1:34-35).

Certainly this took place as Jesus was falsely accused and hated by the Pharisees and Sadducees. Certainly this took place as she watched her son die His painful death upon the cross for sins that He never committed (John 19:25). It must have felt like a dagger into her heart. But, she had resolved in faith, to place herself wholeheartedly in submission to His plans.

After receiving her angelic visitation, Mary heads for the hills, literally. She "went with haste to the hill country, to a city of Judah" (verse 39) to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who probably lived in or around Jerusalem, for her husband, Zachariah was a high priest in Jerusalem, where the temple was. When you put the pieces of the story together, you discover that it was the angel that notified Mary that Elizabeth was already 6 months along in the process of having a son (verse 36).

She who was barren for all of these years was now to have a baby! This was exciting news! Somehow, however, the news didn't yet get to Mary. They didn't have telephones or email in those days. The angel had to tell her.

So, Mary went to visit her relative, Elizabeth. There must have been much joy and excitement in those three months that Mary and Elizabeth spent together. Two giddy pregnant women! Zechariah probably wouldn't have had a chance to speak anyway!

We don't know much about those days. We only know about the first few moments of their time together. We read that Mary, ...

> Luke 1:40-45
> ... 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."

There is so much here to digest. The baby leaping in the womb (verse 41). Elizabeth blessing Mary and her child (verse 42). Elizabeth understanding that Mary's baby is her Lord? (verse 43). But, this morning, I want for us to focus upon verse 45. I want to focus upon Mary's faith.

> Luke 1:45
> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

In some ways, this is a minor dig against her husband. For when Zechariah was visited by the angel, he didn't believe (Luke 1:20). As a result, he was unable to speak. And yet, this was also an acknowledgement of the type of woman that Mary was. She simply trusted in the Lord for all things.

And if Mary models anything for us this morning, it is her faith. Mary was a woman of faith. And all of us are called to believe God. Mary was called to believe God that she would bear the Christ. We are called to believe God that Christ's atonement on the cross is sufficient to cover our sins.

Right now it is Christmas time. It is the time we celebrate and reflect on the truth that God really came. Immanuel. God in the flesh. We have the tested word of God. Mary had a fleeting experience of an angel. How much more should we believe! Do you believe!

Let's turn our focus now to the Magnificat, the song of Mary. You can summarize this Psalm with three words: Praise, Humility, and Mercy. I'm going to use these three words as my outline this morning: Praise, Humility, and Mercy. Let's begin with ...

1. Praise (verses 46-47)

This is found in verses 46-47.

> Luke 1:46-47
> And Mary said,
> "My soul magnifies the Lord,
> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

These verses are Hebrew poetry at it's finest. Hebrew poetry is not based on rhyme and meter. Rather, it is based upon parallelism. That is, saying one thing, and then saying it again in a different way. The different way might be opposite. The different way might be expanding the topic. The different way might simply be bringing in more detail. The beauty of this sort of poetry is that it gives some structure and yet so much freedom to expand the verbal picture of the reality.

This parallel language is exactly what Mary does in these verses. She is giving praise to God, saying the same thing twice. Verse 46 and verse 47 say the same thing. The subjects of verses 46 and 47 are essentially the same. In verse 46, the subject is "my soul." In verse 47, the subject is "my spirit."

You lose Mary's point if you spend your time seeking to discern the difference between these two words. "My soul" and "my spirit" simply depict the internal person. Mary is reflecting upon the intense, inward, all-encompassing sense of her worship before the Lord.

Psalm 103:1 is a great parallel here, "Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name." Mary has been moved to the very depth of her being to exalt the LORD. This isn't a surface praise. She was "singing and making melody with [her] heart to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19).

The verbs are also practical synonyms. In verse 46, the verb is "magnifies." In verse 47, the verb is "rejoices." These are not quite the same, but they get at the same idea, seeing God as worthy of our greatest joy! "Magnify" is to "make great."

When you go to the fast food place and order your super value meal, you can often "super-size" it for an extra dollar. Rather than a large coke, you get an extra-large coke. Rather than large fries, you get extra-large fries. This is the idea. Mary is saying here, "My soul 'super-sizes' the Lord." Obviously, it isn't in the sense that we actually make God bigger, but rather, that He becomes great and glorious in our sight and in the sight of others.

When Mary says that she "rejoices," she simply expresses her great joy from the depths of her spirit. There is genuine joy in Mary's heart. There is genuine happiness in her soul. Psalm 95:1 says, "Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD." This is what Mary was doing.

The objects of these verses are the same. The object in verse 46 is "the Lord." The object in verse 47 is "God my Savior." "The Lord" signifies His reigning and ruling power. "God my Savior" signifies His loving and compassionate kindness. "The Lord" speaks of His transcendence and authority. "God my Savior" speaks of Him imminence and care for us. "The Lord" is seated upon the throne. "God my Savior" has come to help me in my distress.

In these things, Mary is just like us. She needed a Lord to guide her and guard her. She needed a Savior to forgive her and help her.

Contrary to the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church, Mary did sin and did need a Savior to save her from her sin. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Mary was not conceived in sin. "The Immaculate Conception" teaches that Mary was preserved from sin at her conception. In 1854, pope Pius IX issued a papal bull, which said, "We declare, pronounce and define that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, by the singular grace and privilege of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, and that this doctrine was revealed by God, and therefor must be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful." [1]

Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that Mary never sinned. Lest you think that this is outdated, listen to the words of Pope John Paul II from a message he delivered on December 8, 1998:

"O Mary! From the very first moment of life, you were preserved from original sin, through the merits of Jesus, whose Mother you were to become. Sin and death have no power over you. From the moment you were conceived, you have enjoyed the unique privilege of being filled with the grace of your blessed Son, to be holy as he is holy. For this reason the heavenly messenger, sent to announce the divine plan to you, greeted you saying: 'Hail, full of grace' (Lk 1:28). Yes, O Mary, you are full of grace; you are the Immaculate Conception". [2]

But, Mary rejoiced in God, her savior, because she needed a savior. Mary was a woman of praise. This is what God calls all of us to be.

A few weeks ago, we worked through Psalm 107 in our service. It begins with these words, ...

Psalm 107:1-2
Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
For his steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
Whom he has redeemed from trouble.

The redeemed heart will joyfully sing His praise and long to see the Lord magnified! We are saved to worship Him. And so, I ask you, does your heart bubble over in praise to God? Do you have a joyful countenance, that loves to ascribe honor to your King? Does praise come from the fruit of your joy in God for what He has done for you in Christ Jesus? Do you long to lift up His name at home and in the church?

Or, do you complain? Or, are you grumpy? Or, are you unthankful.

The Psalmist says, "Sing for joy in the LORD, O you righteous ones; Praise is becoming to the upright" (Ps. 33:1). Praise is the natural thing for redeemed souls to do.

Let's move on. We have seen Praise (verses 46-47). Now, we turn to ...

2. Humility (verses 48-49)

Mary was a humble woman.

Luke 1:48
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

We don't know anything about Mary's character before the angel appeared to her, except what she reveals to us here. She regarded herself as a humble servant.

I believe that humility is the single, identifying mark of a Christian. The one who sees God for Whom He really is cannot but help to be humble before Him: never coming before the Lord with an attitude of arrogance; never coming before the Lord as if you deserve anything; never coming before the Lord proud of your accomplishments.

Rather, Christians are to boast in the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23-24). Peter tells us that "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). God opposes the one who puffs himself up and thinks more highly of himself that he ought to think (Rom. 12:3).

Not only is Mary humble, but much of Mary's song deals with how God has opposed the proud, but given grace to the humble (as we shall see). This theme of humility is a prominent theme in these words of Mary.

Look at verses 51-53, ...

> Luke 1:51
> He has shown strength with his arm;
> he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

A great illustration of this is Sennacherib, the king of Assyria. When he came to attack the armies of Israel, he send his servant Rabshakeh to cry out to Israel, demanding that they desert. He said, ...

> 2 Kings 18:32-35
> ... do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, "The Lord will deliver us." Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?'"

Do you remember what happened? Hezekiah, in his humility, prayed to God for deliverance. And the angel of the LORD went through the camp of the Assyrians at night and killed 185,000 of the Assyrians. The army turned around and went home.

> Luke 1:51
> He has shown strength with his arm;
> he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

The theme continues in verse 52, ...

Luke 1:52
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;

A great illustration of this is Nebuchadnezzar. He was brought down from his throne. He proudly boasted, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30).

You remember what happened to him? He was brought down from his throne. Sovereignty was removed from him. He was made to dwell with the beasts.

On the other hand, I think of Joseph, who was humbled greatly in prison. God exalted Him to vice-ruler in Egypt!

Luke 1:52
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;

The same thought comes in verse 53, ...

Luke 1:53
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

When the Israelites were hungry in the wilderness, God provided manna for them (Exodus 16). Ruth and Naomi were hungry, and God satisfied them with the gleanings of Boaz' field (Ruth 2). Elijah was hungry and God instructed the ravens to bring him meat and bread. God filled the brook Cherith with water (1 Kings 17: 1-7). God provided food for the widow of Zarephath with a bowl of flour that never emptied and a jar of oil that never needed filling (1 Kings 17:8-16).

By contrast, Solomon, the richest man who ever lived, left this life in emptiness and despair (1 Kings 11). Solomon gave the following testimony: "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity. When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much. But the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep" (Ecc. 5:10-12).

We have just scratched the surface of Biblical examples of the truth that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:11). You will see it over and over and over again in the Bible.

Consider the Christmas story. We have several examples of God looking highly upon the lowly.

When Jesus was born, it was the shepherds that were told of His arrival, not the kings in high places (Luke 2:8-20). These shepherds were probably hired workers who were working the night-shift, taking care of their sheep. There was nothing special about these people. They were the migrant farm-workers of the culture. But God chose to announce the arrival of His Son through these shepherds.

When our baby is born, we will send out a special announcement to those who are most important in our lives. God chose to send His announcement to these lowly shepherds. Remember, God looks upon the humble.

Next week we will look at humble priest, named Simeon and a humble servant, named Anna. They were both humble servants of the Lord, as Mary was. You might argue that some of Mary's statements are prideful. Look at the second half of verse 48, ...

> Luke 1:48
> For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

That's saying that "for generations to come, I'm going to be called blessed!" What sort of arrogance that is!

But it's not. It's not, because of verse 49,

> Luke 1:49
> for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
> and holy is his name.

This verse changes everything. Yes! Mary is great! And we call her blessed today, 2000 years after she lived. But Mary knew why she was blessed. She was blessed because the Lord did it.

Luke 1:49
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

This is how you balance greatness with humility. You can express reality. You can express God's blessing upon your life. But humility will always give the reason, because God is the one who blesses! And we must give praise to him!

Luke 1:49
...holy is his name.

Let's move on to our final point this morning. We have seen Praise (verses 46-47), Humility (verses 48-49), and now we turn to ...

3. Mercy (verses 50-55)

Luke 1:50-55
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;
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."

We see the word "mercy" mentioned twice in these verses. The first comes in verse 50, ...

Luke 1:50
And his mercy is for those who fear him

The second comes in verse 54, ...

> Luke 1:54
> He has helped his servant Israel,
> in remembrance of his mercy,

And everything between these two verses is an expression of God's mercy. His mercy toward those who fear him (verse 50). His mercy toward Israel (verse 54).

Why did God scatter Sennacherib and the Assyrians? They were "proud in the thoughts of their hearts." (verse 51). Because he was being merciful to Israel. Why did God bring Nebuchadnezzar down from his lofty throne in Babylon? He was proud and not "of humble estate" (verse 52). He persecuted God's people, by throwing them in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3 - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego).

So, why does he show mercy? Because he is faithful to his covenant. He is faithful to Israel. He is faithful to his people.

> Luke 1:54-55
> He has helped his servant Israel,
> in remembrance of his mercy,
> as he spoke to our fathers,
> to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

This is what Christmas is all about. It's about God remembering his mercy to Israel. This is Matthew, chapters one through three. Matthew begins his book, describing to the Jews the genealogy of Jesus. He tells of the birth of Christ, and how Christ is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the prophecy. God remembers his mercy to Israel at Christmas.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 18, 2016 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

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[1] The Tablet, December 12, 1953 as quoted by Loraine Boettner, Roman Catholicism, p. 158.

[2] Found at http://www.cin.org/jp2/jp981208.html

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