

# Anticipating Christmas

*"For the Mighty One has done great things for me..." (Luke 1:49a).*

## **Anticipating Christmas**

**Luke 1:46-55**

**46 And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord, 47 and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. 48 For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; for behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. 49 For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name. 50 AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. 51 He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. 52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. 53 HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; and sent away the rich empty-handed. 54 He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his descendants forever."**

What is it that you look forward to at Christmas? [actually solicit some responses]. Gifts? Family? Food? Fun? Travel? There are all sorts of things that we anticipate, that we look forward to at Christmas time.

It may be a bit strange to think of it this way, but our text presents us with what Mary looked forward to that first Christmas. What we will be looking at this morning offers us insight as to what was on the heart and mind of Mary as she anticipated the coming of Jesus Christ. And as I examined what it was that she was looking forward to I came to two conclusions. First, how much we have lost in truly celebrating the birth of Christ, truly considering the meaning of His coming in favor of lesser things; and second, related to the first, the great revealing of the gospel as written in a song by a teenaged girl, probably about 14 or 15, after finding out from an angel named Gabriel she would soon be pregnant, and pregnant in the most unique way ever, supernaturally by way of the work of the Holy Spirit and then trying to sort through what this meant for her. Out of all this comes the hymn that we call the Magnificat – a word that comes from the Latin "manificare" – taken from the first word uttered by Mary in the Greek text – "megaluo" – to magnify. The song of Luke 1:46-55 magnifies, makes large the Lord and it is nothing short of the gospel, the good news that salvation is from the Lord and has come in the person of Jesus Christ.

An other remarkable feature of this hymn of Mary is that although written by a teenaged girl, full of hopes and hormones, we yet see a young girl whose family steeped her in the knowledge of Scripture and of hope in God to the extent that in a very trying and confusing point in her life, rather than folding into herself and into some kind of pity party, she composed a song of such magnitude and full of so much of the grace of God that it is always remembered, first as recorded in the Scriptures themselves and so the grace of God to Mary is remembered every time we read it, but it is also so full of the grace of God that it does us well to see the good news it contains and learn to worship the Lord with every bit as much enthusiasm, expectation and reverential awe of the God who saves sinful men.

Whatever else you might look forward to at Christmas, I hope you will take some time to contemplate what those in Scripture contemplated about the coming of Christ and what they did to communicate the great hope they found in Jesus' birth. Beloved, before us is the gospel according to Mary, the good news of who God is and what He has done, first for Mary and then for all who, in the words of Mary, "**fear Him.**" When considering the birth of Christ, Mary's thoughts move her to ponder God and His Word. In her hymn, Mary reflects upon three aspects of God that would do us well to consider as we celebrate the first coming of Christ.

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## I. **Mary reflected on God's Person (1:46-49)**

As Mary begins her hymn, let us be careful to note that she focus all her attention, all her praise and all her wonder upon God. Let us not forget that Mary had recently been told by the angel of her calling to be the mother of Messiah, the promised Savior who would be Emmanuel, God with them. Also, she had just been with her cousin, Elizabeth, who would soon give birth to John who would become the Baptizer. It is clear the context that when Mary speaks in her hymn of the Lord and of God, she has in mind the wondrous concept that the God who was doing all these things was also the God whom she was carrying in her womb! She realized that somehow the person and the promises of God were all bundled within her.

Mary's hymn is God-centered and God-focused. She is in absolute amazement of what God is doing. Contrary to Catholic theology that plays interpretative games with this text to say it exalts Mary, Mary does nothing but exalt God and she concentrates this high-view of God in three ways noting God's greatness, God's graciousness and God's goodness.

### 1. *God's greatness (1:46)*

Mary begins with the words, **"My soul exalts the Lord..."** As Mary contemplates the coming of the Lord and all that this means to her, her heart and then mouth is filled with the highest and most noble thoughts about God.

As we will come to see, Mary borrows much from the Old Testament Scriptures and one passage in particular she seems to have in mind is Psalm 96:1-4 which says,

**1 Sing to the Lord a new song; Sing to the Lord, all the earth. 2 Sing to the Lord, bless His name; Proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day. 3 Tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples. 4 For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised...**

The young teenaged girl, pregnant, wondering what the future holds, does not question God's goodness or sovereignty in her life. She does not look upon her circumstances as being dire or beyond hope. She holds no pity party but rather turns her circumstances into an opportunity to make a proclamation about God. To **"exalt"** literally means "to make great, glorify, praise, extol or magnify." The idea here is not that Mary can add anything at all to God's goodness and glory. God is perfect and complete without any of us ever uttering a word. Rather, it is her intent, because of her circumstances, because she trusts God (1:38; 45) to make known to others just how great God is because of who He is and what He has done.

One preacher has illustrated the idea of magnifying the Lord with how a telescope magnifies a star. Any star that we can see we know is a vastly huge and splendorous ball of gas burning ever so brightly and more often than not would dwarf our rather small sun. And yet that star appears to us as nothing but a small speck of light. But when we use a telescope, the star appears larger to us and therefore become a bit more like its real self. This is how it is like when we seek to magnify the Lord even as Mary did. When we magnify Him, we are seeking to see Him and present Him more like He really is. To this world, and in our culture, God appears to most like nothing more than a speck of light, very small and unimportant. But as we magnify Him, we reveal Him as being more glorious than most had ever stopped to consider.

And beloved, rather than think that God was doing her a disservice; rather than moaning at the hard lot in life she had seemingly received, Mary looks at the promise of her conceiving the Holy Savior with great praise and adoration. Notice that she "exalts" or "magnifies" the Lord. It is

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something she continuously does and it ought to be something we continually do as well. This is good news that our God is worthy of praise; that He does not act to viciously or maliciously toward us. Indeed He causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on both the evil and the good. The Lord is a good God, worthy of praise no matter what our circumstances. Mary's Lord and our Lord is great. This is good news.

Mary continues her praise of God's greatness in verse 47 saying, **"and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."** Not only does Mary designate God as the very object of her worship in whom she has rejoiced, but she also reveals the reason or cause of the joy she has. It is because the God who has been conceived in her womb is also the God who is her Savior. We might read this, "and my spirit has rejoiced on account of God my Savior. For Mary, the good news was not simply God being God, as wonderful as that might be, but more specifically in knowing God as her Savior. Mary is applying the gospel to herself; she sees herself as the recipient of God's saving work.

But just what does Mary understand as her need to be saved from? As we read through the rest of this hymn and remember the larger context of Luke 1 along with all the Old Testament promises of Messiah's coming to initiate or begin God's plan of salvation, it is apparent that Mary is looking to the Lord as her own Savior from sin, from the curse of the Law, from the wages of that sin, death and damnation and from all the evil that has been brought into this world because of sin. That babe in her womb would redeem her to Himself, to be His own, to live in light of His holiness, His righteousness and with all the blessings that were promised to come with Him as Messiah.

All of this flies in the face of Catholic Theology that teaches Mary as being without sin. Mary's own testimony is that she needed a Savior. She, like all of us, "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;" and are "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:23-24).

Mary rejoiced in this. Consider that "magnifying the Lord" and "rejoicing in His promised salvation in Jesus" go hand in hand. You cannot exalt the Lord without rejoicing. If Mary had simply gone along with the Lord's plan but gripped and complained about the pregnancy, she would not have been magnifying God, but diminishing Him. We do the same when we grumble and complain. As those who call God, "My Savior" our lives should proclaim the good news that God is worthy of our continual praise because He has saved our souls from self, sin and Satan. If Mary's thoughts had been that all her hopes and dreams for life had been dashed by this dastardly change of plans by God, then she would not have spoken highly of God. What could be more important, Mary's youthfully conceived plans of life or God's calling her to bear the Messiah? But what we see in Mary is her praising God for lifting her up out of the mundane of the world and calling her to a great task. And not only does God call her to this great task, but He also enables her, graces her with the power to fulfill that task. God planted the baby in the womb and God would empower her to do everything necessary to complete that task. And in this Mary rejoices. She reveals that God is everything to her, including her Savior.

As you consider Christmas, do you consider it good news to dwell upon and discuss with others? Do you think about God coming to be your Savior? For we know that Jesus, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world, came to this earth through this willing servant Mary. God sent His Son not as a baby, but as a human, who started as a baby. But the point is that God has become human. In many ways Mary here expresses more of an awe of being saved by the Babe in her womb than the fact that she will give birth to Him. There is nothing shallow in this teenage girl's heart. There is something to be said for simple faith, but never confuse simple faith with shallow faith. In verses 46-47 we learn that Mary's "soul" and "spirit" were engaged in this exalting and rejoicing. There was nothing superficial or spur of the moment in her praise. This was a deep, thoughtful

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conviction that because of the coming of Christ, she must *magnify* and *rejoice* in her Lord and Savior. Will we so consider and rejoice in our Lord God and Savior?

## 2. *God's graciousness (1:48)*

This moves us to the second reflection of Mary on God's person. In verse 48, Mary reveals why she rejoices and magnifies the Lord saying, ***"For He has regard for the humble state of His bonds slave..."*** This is good news indeed, that God regards the humble state of condition of His own. He knows where we live. He knows our circumstances. He knows our upbringing. And yet, He calls us out of the world to live for Him. God called Mary out of her humble state. The idea here is not on the virtue or righteousness of Mary, but rather upon the great act of God to regard; that is to favor or grace the life of Mary, who by her own confession, has nothing to offer God. The idea of ***"regard"*** speaks of God's loving care in selecting Mary to be the mother of Messiah in spite of herself and her circumstances. This is good news that God regards to grace or favor His own. As God looked at Mary, what did she have to offer? Not only was she a sinner, poor and without hope apart from God, but she was also of "humble state" – meaning that her surroundings were lowly, her town, Nazareth, too deplorable; her parents, too unimportant. This was the Son of the Most High God coming into the world. Didn't He deserve better? What does God want with a poor peasant girl? I love how Martin Luther paraphrased the essence of Mary's thoughts here:

*"God has regarded me, a poor, despised, and lowly maiden, though He might have found a rich, renowned, noble, and mighty queen, the daughter of princes and great lords. He might have found the daughter of Annas or of Caiaphas, who held the highest position in the land. But He let His pure and gracious eyes light on me and used so poor and despised a maiden, in order that no one might glory in His presence, as though he were worthy of this, and that I must acknowledge it all to be pure grace and goodness and not at all my merit or worthiness."*

Mary makes none of this about her. She does not seek to draw attention to herself persay, but points to this one important truth, the regard of God; the favor of God; the grace of God. Martin Luther goes on to say:

*Hence she does not glory in her worthiness nor yet in her unworthiness, but solely in the divine regard, which is so exceedingly good and gracious that He deigned to look upon such a lowly maiden, and to look upon her in so glorious and honorable a fashion. They, therefore, do her an injustice who hold that she gloried, not indeed in her virginity, but in her humility. She gloried neither in the one nor in the other, but only in the gracious regard of God. Hence the stress lies not on the word "low estate" but on the word "regarded." For not her humility but God's regard is to be praised. When a prince takes a poor beggar by the hand, it is not the beggar's lowliness but the prince's grace and goodness that is to be commended.*

Isn't that good news? That the great Prince of Peace has graced us with Himself and granted to all who believe salvation from sin and the hope of heaven! This is what Mary thought about concerning the birth of Jesus, let us do likewise. When Mary says, ***"For behold, from this time on all generations will count me as blessed"*** she is not pointing to herself. The point is that she had become an example of God's grace, God's favor coming upon one of His own. While Mary is uniquely blessed in being the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, Mary is no more blessed than any other believer who recognizes God's favor in his or her life. Jesus would say, *"Blessed are the poor in*

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*spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* Our humble state includes both the truth that we are spiritual paupers as well as earthly nobodies. By and large the church is made up not of the world's elite and powerful, but rather of those who like Mary, are regarded by the world as nothing. But that's okay with me, to be regarded by the world as nothing but regarded by God as His son; that is good news indeed! And so says the word of God. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 we read:

***26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, 29 so that no man may boast before God. 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."***

To consider the coming of Christ is to reflect upon the grace of the Lord to know that He has regarded your helpless estate and has sent His own Son, and shed His Son's blood for your soul. Would you say with Mary,

***"My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; for behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed."***

### 3. God's goodness (1:49)

As Mary thinks about Christ birth, she also considers God's goodness, a goodness that is revealed in two ways, first in God's power and secondly in God's holiness.

She continues in verse 49, ***"For the Mighty One [the one of Power] has done great things for me..."*** Mary is simply declaring the truth that God is able to do for her what she could not have done for herself. She no doubt remembered the words of the angel Gabriel who said to her in 1:38, ***"For nothing will be impossible with God."*** In other words, God was willing to use His power for Mary's good. When God called her to conceive His Son, this was for God's glory and her good. When God led her to visit Elizabeth, this was for His glory and her good. When God would orchestrate the circumstances to move a 9 month pregnant girl some 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey, it was for His glory and her good.

How often do we see the difficulties of life as if God were ignoring us; as if God were not present; as if God had forgotten about us? Yet we know that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. In this way there is nothing truly bad for the believer. That does not mean without difficulty, but every trial, and every hardship becomes an opportunity for us to see the Mighty one do great things for us that reveal His glory and work to our good.

Remember that Mary had been regarded, found favor, grace from the Lord. But never think that such a regard equates into an easy life. If the so-called faith movement; the health and wealth theology so rampant today were true, a teaching that says with enough faith you will always have health and wealth, then Mary was a faithless wonder. Nothing, from an earthly perspective, went well for Mary. Pregnant as a teenager before her marriage. Hard travels from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to Egypt and back to Nazareth. Seeing her Son, Jesus, grow and do things she did not

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understand. Being heart broken as religious leaders mocked and hated Him. And of course, seeing her Son whipped, beaten and crucified on that cross. There was nothing easy about her life even though she was favored of God. Let us learn from her example, seeking to live our lives acknowledging God for who He is, what He has done for us, rejoicing that Jesus is our Savior even when He upsets our plans and leads us into suffering. Let us remember that He has looked upon our humble state and has chosen us for His glory and our own good. He is the Mighty one who has done great things!

And then she declares at the end of verse 49, **"And holy is His name."** Without getting in too deep, let us remember that God is totally unlike us. His is completely separate from all that is sinful in everything He is and does. God is pure, God is right, God is different. The name of Lord pictures all that God is and does. She says this because she knows she is not holy like the Lord. In comparison to the Lord, she is nothing. But the good news is that God has touched her with His holiness. He has blessed her, graced her, and given her hope.

We are being reminded that in the great work of salvation, God reveals Himself as holy. Until people see themselves as unholy and therefore deserving of all consequences of our unholiness, our being so unlike God, we will never fully appreciate and celebrate aright the coming of Jesus, first to the cradle and second to reign and rule both in our lives and over all things.

So then, Mary first reflects upon God's person from her own personal experience. Everything she states is a consideration of who God is and what God has done for her. And while we do not have time today to fully develop the rest of the thoughts of Mary's hymn, let me give you the outline and some things to consider.

## II. **Mary reflected on God's Plan (1:50-53)**

Beginning in verse 50 we note something different. First, Mary includes now a direct quote from Psalm 103:17. There is a sense that Mary is now showing us in her hymn how her personal experience is justified by Scripture. This is how it should always be, that how we live and what we say is grounded in Scripture. She writes, **"And His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him."**

God's plan is to extend mercy, that is to keep extend the loving and gracious promise of salvation to a group of people, that is to those who fear Him. This salvation is finally revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who is in Mary's womb. We often consider the word mercy to mean, "not getting what we deserve." If a criminal deserves a death sentence, but receives from the judge a pardon, that is mercy. But there is another sense mercy as well, that mercy is God's bringing the blessing of salvation, of deliverance from the punishment and power of sin. From Psalm 103:17 we read,

*But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him...*

As Mary considers the birth of Christ, she is reminded that there has never been a time when God has not revealed Himself to be a gracious, forgiving, patient and loving God. He patiently calls sinners to Himself generation after generation. But this brings us to a second thing to note about Mary's shift, not only does she appeal to Scripture, but also she moves from what is true for herself and what has been her experience to what can be the experience of anyone, anyone who what? Anyone who fears the Lord.

The idea of fearing the Lord is not as some terror or horror of suffering under that infinite wrath of God in the judgment. No, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" says Solomon in

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Proverbs 1:7. The fear here is a respectful, reverential childlike awe. It is to be in wonder of who God is and to revere who He is as well as what He does. Everything God does for us should be regarded as a wonder because indeed His mercies are new every morning.

Do you fear the Lord? Do you respect the Lord? Do you regard the Lord as awesome and marvelous in all that He does? This is how you know if you have received mercy, the lovingkindness of the Lord? When you fear the Lord; when you want to please the Lord with every aspect of your life. Mary gave herself, literally and spiritual to serving the Lord. The good news is that God can be feared in this way, rather than in His wrath.

And notice quickly the two groups of people that exist in God's plan. There are those who fear Him, who have had eyes opened to see His lovingkindness and realize their humble estate. These are the ones Mary says in verse 52 that God will exalt, will lift up to heaven to be with Him. There are the ones that Mary says, appealing to Psalm 107:9, that the Lord has filled the hungry ones with good things. Both of these benefits of fearing the Lord remind us of the later words of Jesus who said in Luke 18 when speaking of the tax-collector/sinner who appealed to God for mercy received it and Jesus said in verse 14

***I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.***

And with regard to being satisfied, filled with the good things of God and salvation, Jesus said in the Matthew 5:6, ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."*** To consider the birth of Christ is to consider if you fear Him who grants lovingkindness, who exalts the humble and who satisfies those who hunger and thirst after God's righteousness.

In contrast to the humble are the haughty. These are those who according to verse 51 are "proud in the thoughts of their hearts." It not just that they act proud, their very hearts think that they need little if anything from God. They can please themselves, save themselves serve themselves. These, God scatters, He disperses them. Notice that the proud are running from God and God also scatters them. It is not that God simply pushes them out, they are running away from God and God gives them over to their rebellion. In verse 52 we are told that God brings down, rather than exalts, those who are rulers, "mighty ones" who think they are powerful enough to carry on with God in their lives. To contemplate the birth of Christ is ask God if you have been proud in action and thought and if you have been living on your own rule apart from God. In then end, such a life will bring you down and you will, as Mary noted in verse 53, ultimately be sent away empty-handed, without the hope of the Savior in your life.

God's plan then is to exalt the humble and satisfy them with the good things of salvation but to bring down the haughty and send them away into damnation empty-handed. Where are you in this plan? The good news is that you can appeal to God, ask Him to make you hungry, ask Him to open your eyes to see His lovingkindness. And the truth is, if you have begun to cry out for such things, God is already opening your heart to such truths. What good news Mary offers us

### **III. Mary reflected on God's Promise (1:54-55)**

Again, we are so short on time to fully develop this, but in these final verses of Mary's hymn, she reminds herself and us that with the coming of Christ is the fulfillment of one of the most important aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant, that promise that God made with Abraham back in Genesis 12, and 17. Remember the promise?

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## **Genesis 12:1-3**

**12 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."**

## **Genesis 17:7**

***I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.***

One of the great promises made to Abraham was that in him, and through then his descendants after him, all the families of the earth will be blessed. God kept this promise, bringing Him, Jesus Christ, the one through whom all the families, the very tongues and tribes of men, would be blessed with the gift of salvation, that is the forgiveness of sins, of being made right with the holy God who created them by their trusting that Jesus paid the penalty for their sins by His death on the cross, that Jesus confirmed His position as Savior by rising from the dead, and that Jesus would impart to them His own righteousness, that is His own heart for living for God. This was the promise of God that Mary reflected upon, that in her womb salvation had come. This is what caused her to magnify the Lord and to rejoice in God her Savior.

Will any of this be your reflection as you consider your celebration of the birth of Christ? I pray that it will. I pray that at some point in your festivities, you might take some time to share with your family and friends the wonder that God would so favor us in our humble state with the simple call, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved..." (Acts 16:31). And never forget that to believe means "by life" your life, your actions your very words ought to reflect that Jesus in you has so wonderfully changed you. Mary certainly was changed by Jesus in her and I pray that spiritually, we all would experience the new birth whereby we all know Christ in us, the hope of glory!

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*Soli Deo Gloria*

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