

Magnificat

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48 For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. 49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. 50 And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones, And exalted *the* lowly. 53 He has filled *the* hungry with good things, And *the* rich He has sent away empty.

54 He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of *His* mercy,

55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever." (Lk. 1:46-55)

Mary, or Miriam, as they would have called her, had likely grown up in Nazareth. Nazareth was a smallish town, though Galilee, the province it was in, was lush, fertile, and fairly busy with trade. Though it appears she, like her betrothed Joseph were from royal stock, their families had come to hard times. They were poor, and some time after this, when presenting Jesus at the Temple, they could not afford a lamb, but could only bring the two turtledoves, which were an allowed substitute for those too poor to afford a lamb.

Poverty can have many causes, but one of them, for Israel at this time, was the taxes imposed by Rome. Israel was living under the foot of a foreign nation. Besides their own tax mandated by the Law, which consisted of two tithes plus a Temple tax, which came to 27,5 %, they also had to pay Roman tax. There were plenty of them: a poll tax, a tax on unmarried men and women, a tax on the land, a tax on anything bought or sold. If you were subsistence farmers, with basic tradesmen living in those subsistence farm towns, all these taxes were bound to add to your burden.

Mary was probably about sixteen years old at this time. It was the custom in Israel at the time to marry very young; Jewish boys were expected to marry at about sixteen or seventeen, and the girls even younger. She was betrothed to Joseph, which was something like engagement, only more binding, and more serious. It was considered as if married, though the couple were not actually married and allowed to live together until the wedding ceremony which would take place anything from months to years after the betrothal.

In chapter 1, we read that Mary received a visit from one of the only two named angels in Scripture: Gabriel, Michael being the other. Gabriel is given the privilege of announcing to Mary that she is God's chosen vessel to bare the Messiah. He tells her to rejoice, and count herself privileged that her son will be the Son of God, and the Son of David, the ruler over the house of Jacob, with a kingdom that will have no end. Mary knew her Scriptures, and she knew that this was none other than the promised Messiah.

She was perplexed because while she was betrothed to Joseph, it was clearly not going to be Joseph's son that would be the Messiah. Gabriel explained that this would be through a miracle, an act of divine creation in her womb, where a true human nature would be conceived in her by the Holy Spirit, in perfect union with the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity. Gabriel told her that nothing is impossible for God, because even her cousin Elizabeth had now conceived by God's special plan.

Mary submitted to this: 38 Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." (Lk. 1:38)

So she then decided to make the journey south to Elizabeth, who lived in Judea. She probably travelled in some sort of convoy because of the distance and the danger. Upon entering the house, Mary announced herself. Within Elizabeth's womb, the six-month old John made such a movement

as to feel like a leap! Elizabeth knew that her son was to be the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who would proclaim and prepare the way. She also knew that Messiah would then be born in the same generation as her son. So when John leapt as he did, she knew that this was the mother of Messiah. Immediately, being filled with the Spirit, she proclaimed something that would sound very similar to what her son would one day say of Jesus:

"Blessed *are* you among women, and blessed *is* the fruit of your womb! 43 "But why *is* this *granted* to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 "For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. 45 "Blessed *is* she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord." (Lk. 1:42-45)

To that, Mary spoke out a poem, a song, just saturated with Scripture. She was truly a daughter of the Book, because her poem recalls Hannah's song, several Psalms, the prophets.

What is her song about? In one word: grace. It is about the marvels of grace. Mary is amazed by God's grace in choosing her, amazed by how grace brings these turnarounds, and amazed by how faithful God is. So she breaks into a song of worship. Grace, when it is understood, always brings worship, joy.

Look at the opening lines.

46 And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

This is called the Magnificat because that is the first word in the song in the Latin translation. Mary says she magnifies the Lord which means she wants to show forth how great and good God is, she wants to enlarge His fame, and parallel to that, she has rejoiced in God her Saviour. This word means to be exceedingly joyful, overjoyed. You exalt (spelt with an 'a') when you exult (spelt with a 'u'). God is magnified when we are delighted in Him.

The reason Mary is worshipping is because she has experienced grace. She calls God by two titles here: Lord and Saviour. She had submitted to the Lordship of God, but knew she could never please God on her own. So she calls God her Saviour.

Spurgeon: "She needed a Saviour as much as we do, for she was a sinner like ourselves; and though she was blessed among women, she here indicates that she owed all that blessedness to the grace of God, who had become a Saviour to her, as well as to us."

Mary was not born without sin. Mary was a sinner like all of us, and that's why she needed a Saviour. And when she had received God's salvation, she had received grace.

But now, as God's progressive revelation was about to take a huge leap forward and bring in the Messiah, she saw that she was a crucial vessel in God's plan of grace. This coming Incarnation was a massive invasion of grace. Mary could see it in three ways.

I. God's Grace is Stunningly Personal

48 For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. 49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy *is* His name. 50 And His mercy *is* on those who fear Him From generation to generation. (Lk. 1:48-50)

Mary says in verse 48, God has looked upon the lowly state of His maidservant. Here I am, a poor peasant girl in Nazareth. I have no title, no lands, no inheritance. I am betrothed to someone equally

poor. But God has looked upon me, regarded me, and seen my humiliation. This word means to look upon with considerateness, kindness, favour.

Of all the maidens in Israel, God chose Mary. Humbled, forgotten, anonymous. But now, Mary knows that from now on, she will be considered privileged. All generations will count her privileged, consider her to have been enormously blessed. By allowing her to become the bearer of Messiah, she shares in that honour.

So she says, He is who is mighty has done great things for me. Grace has reached down and done great things for Mary. Holy is His name. He is unique, pure, glorious, beautiful. But He is powerful, and He has exercised that power towards me.

What Mary is marvelling in is the personal nature of grace. Grace is not scattershot, random, and impersonal. Yes, the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, but it calls us by name.

So the LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name." (Exod. 33:17)

God kindly, personally, calls you to salvation. He deals with you as a person, as His creation whom He knows. He knows the hairs on your head, the cells in your body. He knows your soul, with all your wants, desires. He knows every sin, every failure. But yet he knows you as an individual.

Jesus said of the way He leads His people: "To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." (Jn. 10:3)

Can you imagine for a moment a god who didn't know our names, and didn't care to know? Or one that saved us, but wasn't really interested in any one of us, just that He saved a whole lot of us?

This is the Triune God of the Bible. Grace is personal.

One of the most touching scenes in the Bible is when another Mary, Mary Magdalene, is at the tomb of Jesus, so flustered by the empty body that she thinks Jesus is the groundskeeper and asks if the body has been moved. Jesus says only one word, and Mary snaps out of her fluster and focuses. He just says her name, "Mary." I wonder what it will be one day to look upon our risen Lord, approach Him, and hear Him say our name.

But personal does not mean partial. God does not arbitrarily reject men. In verse 50, Mary recounts that God's grace comes to every generation.

50 And His mercy *is* on those who fear Him From generation to generation. (Lk. 1:50)

In any age, in any century, those that fear Him, believe on Him, know and reverently worship and serve Him – His mercy is on them. One of the most basic principles of the universe is stated in James 4:6: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

If you humble yourself, and empty your hands and bow the neck and the knee, you are eligible for grace.

But Mary's rejoicing and magnifying of God's grace goes from the personal now to the practical.

II. God's Grace is a Shocking Reversal

51 He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones, And exalted *the* lowly. 53 He has filled *the* hungry with good things, And *the* rich He has sent away empty. (Lk. 1:51-53)

In these three verses, Mary sings of why the God of Israel is so unusual in the world of gods and men. In the world of men, might is right. Proud men become powerful men, and then their pride and their power grow and feed off each other. The powerful rule over the weak, and have their way in the world. The powerful have means and can command what they want.

Conversely, the lowly are powerless. They are often oppressed, manipulated, exploited. They do not grow in power, they stay weak. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer, the weak get weaker, the strong get stronger. Survival of the fittest.

But the God of Israel, the God of Messiah Jesus is the God of grace. What grace does is stunning reversals. Grace is unlooked for, unexpected, unpredictable. God turns everything upside down. Using His strength, His power, His wealth, His might, He defeats and routs those who are proud and arrogant in their thoughts and hearts. The self-inflated and self-promoted, He dethrones. Those humble, humiliated, He exalts. Those overfed and self-satisfied, He sends away with nothing, and those hungry, He fills them.

Now even in Israel, steeped in the Scriptures, this wasn't properly understood. By the time of Christ, there was a strong theology that wealth meant righteousness, and that God favoured them.

But Mary looks at her situation, and what it means for the whole world. Here she is, a sixteen-year old peasant girl in unheard-of Nazareth. She is about as poor, powerless, plain and weak as they come. The mighty sitting in their palaces in Rome, in Caesarea Philippi, in Jerusalem would not go looking among the poor of Nazareth for the mother of the King of Kings. But here she sees the great irony, the great humour that grace has. It deliberately overlooks those proud and powerful in their own eyes, and exalts the lowly, feeds the hungry, saves the weak. God is going to save the weak by using the weak. He will save the humble by using the humiliated. He will save the lowly by using the insignificant.

It is what Tolkien called, the eucatastrophe. the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears

But it is staggeringly different. It is so different that no one in the ancient world prized the idea of humility. No one in the ancient world would have thought of this verse: **Luk 18:14** "...for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

One theologian called the work of grace "God's everlasting surprise". It reverses everything we would expect. We expect power to prevail. But God's grace is powerfully unexpected.

Now, the Bible actually gives us the reason why God prefers this approach.

26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence. 30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God-- and righteousness and sanctification and redemption-- 31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD." (1 Cor. 1:26-31)

Here is the big secret behind grace. God is not going to share His glory with proud human beings. In the glory war, it's winner take all. God will not let us take an iota of credit for what is His. So what He does is to ignore those who are self-sufficient. He passes over those strong in themselves. He dismisses those self-satisfied, and full of themselves. Because they will boast, and take the credit, and expect to share the glory.

But to those who are empty-handed, those who cannot purchase what He has, those who cannot manipulate through power, those who are low, empty, poor in spirit, God says, these are perfect to shower My grace on. These will unmistakably show that what I did was all grace and gift and not something made by man.

God doesn't trade with man. He gives freely, and it must be received freely. God doesn't negotiate and reach a settlement with you. You accept His terms or none at all. And the terms are simple. God says: I will get all the credit, and you will get all the benefit. But no sharing or mixing of those two.

What that means is that if you want to be in a position to receive grace: come empty-handed. Even if you are wealthy by the world's standards, wise by the world's standards, powerful by the world's standards, come before God as if you have nothing. Come empty-handed. Come as simple as a child. Come as weak and needy as one wounded. God loves to exalt those who will humbly give Him all the glory.

Mary looks at this and rejoices, and so should we. Mary's song sings of how grace is personal, then it sings of how grace is a shocking reversal but there is a final stanza in her song.

III. God's Grace is Steadfastly Faithful

54 He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of *His* mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever." (Lk. 1:54-55)

Mary here remembers that who and what she is about to give birth to is the fulfillment of a promise given 2000 years before. God had told Abraham that in his seed (singular) in his descendant, all nations would be blessed. God told Moses that a Prophet like him would arise and lead Israel. God promised David that his descendant would rule over a kingdom without end. God told Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, Micah, Malachi that God would bring in a new covenant, and send Messiah to bare the sins of Israel and the world, and eventually defeat her enemies and return her glory, and complete all the promises to the nation.

And now Mary reflects that stirring in her womb at that very moment is the Yes to all those promises. God has not forgotten. God did not make empty promises. God did not promise but then get thwarted by circumstances. A grace that can promise but not deliver is really no grace at all.

But when God makes gracious promises, He means to keep every one of them. I will send a Messiah. I will forgive everyone who believes in Him. I will send my Spirit. I will come for you. I will prepare a place for you. I will take you home to be with me. I will wipe away every tear and every sorrow.

The wonderful thing about free grace is that it is free at both ends. It is free in its offer and giving, and free in its secure keeping. If God gave it to you because of some goodness in you, then God would require you to keep it by some goodness in you. But if God delights to clothe the prodigal son, and accept the weeping woman of the night, and receive the weeping tax-collector, then He delights to give it for free. And because there was no price tag at the beginning, there is no interest

charged later on. If you could not earn it in the first place, you cannot keep it by paying instalments. It is free. God makes the promise to keep you, and it is He who does so, using the means of your persevering faith.

In his day, C. S Lewis was widely considered to be the most learned man in the world. He had read nearly everything significant or important to read classically, philosophically and religiously. He had spent years as an atheist, and spent years comparing religions.

A debate was being held at a conference in Britain on comparative religion. These wise and scholarly were debating the differences between religions. And then the question came up, what makes Christianity unique? Incarnation? No, other religions had some version of Incarnation. Resurrection? No, other religions had some version of resurrection.

At this point, C.S. Lewis wandered into the room, a little early for his presentation. He asked, "What's all this arguing about?" They told him they were trying to find the difference between Christianity and other religions. Lewis looked at them and said, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." The room fell silent. Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim. After a moment someone commented that Lewis had a point, Christianity teaches this unique idea of grace. Stunningly personal. A shocking reversal. Steadfastly faithful.