

The Magnificat
Luke 1:39-56
Pastor John Miller

I want to give us the first two verses of our text, Luke 1:39-40, to get us started. “Now Mary arose in those days...”—that is, at the time of the visitation to Zacharias and the visitation to Mary—“...and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.”

We can only try to imagine the thoughts and emotions of Mary’s heart and mind after the visitation and annunciation of the angel Gabriel to her. What an amazing encounter! Gabriel came from God to Nazareth and appeared to Mary, this peasant girl, and told her she would be the mother of the Messiah, the Savior of the world. She asked, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” And the angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you,” and the one conceived in her womb would be “the Son of God.”

So in all this excitement, amazement and joy, Mary quickly gathered her things and went on an 80- to 90-mile journey from Nazareth, in the northern part of Israel by Lake Galilee, to the southern region of Judea in the hill country—probably to Hebron where most of the priests lived—to the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth.

Why did Mary go to see Elizabeth? Mary just found out she was going to have a baby, she found out her baby would be the Messiah, the Savior of the world, and she believed the messenger. She said, “Behold, the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” “Maidservant” is a female “doulos” or “bondslave.” She basically said, “Lord, have Your way. I’m here to do whatever You want me to do.” Then the angel told her that it was the sixth month of her cousin, Elizabeth’s pregnancy, who had been barren. Elizabeth’s baby would be the forerunner, John the Baptist, of the Messiah. Mary would have been given that information.

So Mary packed her bags and took this long journey. She was about 14-16 years old. She wouldn’t travel by herself; she would have to go in a caravan. It would take three-to-four days of travel.

I have many questions about this, which I’ll have to ask Mary when I get to heaven. I’ll ask her, “Did you let your parents know that you were expecting before you left?” “Or did you keep it a secret?” The Bible doesn’t give us this information. My theory is that hearing about Elizabeth’s pregnancy, which was a miracle because she was past the child-bearing years, and because Mary’s own pregnancy also was a miracle since she was a virgin, that she went quickly to see Elizabeth for the sake of mutual encouragement, joy and fellowship. It seems that pregnant women love to talk to each other.

What a picture this would be of this older woman with this younger woman. Someone said, “The maiden visited the matron.” These were two expectant mothers, one in the flower of her years and the other whose bloom was long gone. What a contrast between younger Mary and

older Elizabeth. They must have talked way into the night. Elizabeth was six-months pregnant, and Mary was just a few-days pregnant. What a blessing it must have been for Elizabeth to encourage Mary's heart and strengthen her faith. I wish Luke would have recorded their conversations.

We're going to find out that Mary spent three months with Elizabeth and Zacharias, which would have taken them all the way up to the birth of John the Baptist. My guess is that Mary stayed until the birth of John, saw him, her faith was confirmed with excitement about the forerunner and then she went back home. She then told her parents and Joseph, and God had to send an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit," Matthew 1:20.

So there were these supernatural events, but there also was the natural joy of these two women as they talked late into the night and encouraged one another. It reminds me of the importance of fellowship for encouragement. The Bible says, "...not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as is the manner of some," Hebrews 10:25. But we should provoke one another to love and to good works. Our problem is that we just provoke each other. We should stimulate one another, encourage one another to love and good works. We need mutual encouragement. So it was for confirmation, comfort and encouragement that Mary went to see her cousin, Elizabeth.

There are two parts to the text, and I want to look at the first part, Elizabeth's prophecy, in verses 41-45. We'll see, first, that John is filled with the Spirit. So Mary left Nazareth and went to the hill country of Judea. She would have arrived unannounced. "And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb...." The baby "leaped"; it didn't just kick or turn over, and the connotation is that the baby was leaping for joy. This was prophesied in verse 15, when the angel told Zacharias that John the Baptist "will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb."

So we'll see that John is filled with the Spirit, leaping, Elizabeth will be filled with the Spirit, speaking, and Mary will be filled with the Spirit, singing.

Verses 41-44, "...and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women...'—it says "among women; not over women —“...and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.”

By the way, John the Baptist was only six months in the womb, about nine inches long and about one-and-a-half pounds, but he already experienced emotions. John is leaping for joy and filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb, verse 15, yet today this child could be tragically aborted.

Now we see a marvelous prophecy, in verse 42. “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” “Lord” is the word “Kurios.” There is a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament known as the Septuagint, done in the inner-Testament period. It’s a Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures. When the translators came to the word “Yahweh” or “Jehovah,” they translated it “Kurios.”

That is what is used in this verse, which indicates the deity of the Lord, that Elizabeth had a supernatural illumination and understanding of the baby in Mary’s womb. All we know from the text is that Mary greeted Elizabeth; Mary didn’t yet tell her about Jesus in her womb. Then Elizabeth prophesied over Mary, verses 44-45. She said, “For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.” Again, “Lord” here is “Kurios” or “Jehovah” or “Yahweh.” This is the prophecy of Elizabeth.

Notice, in verse 41, that “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” First, the Holy Spirit brings us joy. Luke’s Gospel emphasizes the Holy Spirit more than any other Gospel. Galatians 5:22 says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace....” So if you want love, joy and peace, you go to the Holy Spirit. You drink of the Spirit. You open your heart to the Spirit of God. And He brings other things as well.

Elizabeth has joy, and Christmas is about joy. We sing, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.” And all around the Advent story in the Bible we find joy in those who are there. Elizabeth has joy, John in the womb has joy, Mary has joy, Simeon has joy, Zacharias has joy, the angels have joy, the shepherds have joy, the wise men have joy—everything is about joy at Christmas.

Second, the Holy Spirit opens Elizabeth’s lips, verse 42. “Then she spoke out with a loud voice.” Any time someone is filled with the Spirit, they speak, they pray, they worship, they proclaim the glories of the Lord.

Third, the Holy Spirit brings blessing, verse 42 and 45. The word “blessed” is used twice in verse 42 and again in verse 45. “Blessed” means “the divine favor and approval of God.”

And fourth, the Holy Spirit also brings illumination, verse 43. “But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” How did Elizabeth know this? It was the Holy Spirit. If you want illumination when you read the Bible, if you want understanding of who God is that results in transformation of your life, you need the Holy Spirit. The holy Word of God works together with the Holy Spirit of God to transform the holy child of God into the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I call the Bible and the Spirit “the dynamic duo” in the Christian life. They are what transforms our lives. If you want to read with understanding and have illumination, you must rely upon the Holy Spirit.

And fifth, the Holy Spirit confirms our faith, verse 45. Elizabeth said, “Blessed is she who believed...”—that’s Mary’s faith—“...for there will be...”—here’s the encouragement—“...a

fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.” So everything that the angel Gabriel told Mary would be performed, and Mary had faith and believed.

The second part of our text is the praise of Mary, in verses 46-56. There is no break in this passage; they are still together in Elizabeth’s home. Now Mary begins to sing. It’s the first song in Luke’s Gospel.

“And Mary said: ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth 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 on those who fear Him...’—or “reverence Him”—‘...from generation to generation.’”

Now notice that Mary speaks in the prophetic, past tense. Verse 51, “He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. 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 seed forever.’ And Mary remained with her about three months...”—which would take her up to the birth of John the Baptist—“... and returned to her house.”

As I pointed out, Luke’s Gospel is the singing Gospel. Mary sings, Zacharias sings, Simeon sings and the angels sing. Mary’s song is the first recorded song. It is called the Magnificat, which is taken from the first word of the Latin translation, the word “magnify,” in verse 46. Mary’s song magnifies the grace and mercy of God and the works and attributes of God. And the works of the past will carry into the future. So this little, peasant girl from Nazareth begins to sing this beautiful song.

I want to make a few, introductory remarks about the Magnificat. First, the name is taken from the Latin word “to magnify.” Second, it reveals Mary’s knowledge of Scripture, especially of the Psalms and the song of Hannah, in 1 Samuel 2. Mary obviously knew the story. Someone called Mary’s song “a perfect mosaic of Old Testament quotations.” So Mary had God’s Word hidden in her heart, and it turned into a song. Mary’s song is a humble contemplation of the grace and mercy of God.

I believe that when the Word of God fills our hearts, it brings joy and a song. Again, the Spirit of God, using the Word of God, puts a song in the heart of a child of God. If you want to have a heart of joy, read and study the Bible. Feed on the Bible. Then yield to the Holy Spirit, and He will produce joy and a song in your life.

Mary had a great knowledge of the Bible. But she probably would have been illiterate. She only heard the Scriptures read at the synagogue. But she retained that and stored that in her heart. It’s so important for young people to store God’s Word in their heart. I’m convinced that the best time to memorize Scripture is in your youth.

The Scriptures that I quote I memorized as a young Christian in my early 20s. And I grew up in Sunday school learning the Bible. So it's stored in my heart. I haven't memorized new verses for years. I don't memorize new verses anymore. They were all stored in my heart when I was a little boy and a teenager. So store God's Word in your heart, and they'll be a song in your heart coming out your lips in praise to God.

Third, Mary's Magnificat is classic, Hebrew poetry using parallelism and speaking in the prophetic, past tense. Parallelism is saying the same thing in two, different ways.

Mary's song is broken into three categories. First, Mary was passionately magnifying the Lord, verses 46-47. "And Mary said: 'My soul magnifies the Lord.'" Now here is the Hebrew parallelism; she says the same thing a different way: "And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." First it's her soul magnifying the Lord, then it's her spirit rejoicing in God her Savior. How marvelous that is.

How do we magnify the Lord? We don't make God bigger. Rather, we live in such a way that God is seen more clearly in us. Then God is magnified in other people's eyes. When we use a magnifying glass, it doesn't make the words bigger; it makes them look bigger. When we magnify God we're making God look bigger in the eyes of others in their own heart and mind.

First, we magnify God with our minds. We fill our minds with Scripture, like Mary did, and the doctrines of the Word of God lead to doxology. When you learn the Scriptures, you begin to praise the Lord. Educate your mind with the Word of God. It's the Spirit of God using the Word of God. You can't be a strong, vibrant, healthy, growing Christian apart from a mind that is transformed by the Word. The Bible says in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," and it's the Spirit of God through the Word of God that does that.

Second, we magnify God with our soul and spirit. Mary passionately magnified God, verse 46. She said, "My soul..."—which means my "being" or "inner person"—"...magnifies the Lord." Bible students wrestle with whether man is a trichotomy—soul, spirit and body—or a dichotomy—soul and body, in which soul and spirit are one. I tend to believe we are a dichotomy; that we have a soul and body. Maybe we can distinguish between soul and spirit, but it's not clear in Scripture.

It's talking about the immaterial part, the real part of you. The real you is not your physical body; the soul and spirit is the inner you, in your heart. The Bible says, "Our outward man is perishing, yet the inner man is being renewed day by day," 2 Corinthians 4:16. The outward beauty fades, but the inward beauty gets stronger. It's another way of saying, "all my heart" or "all my being." We would say, "I worship God, I love God, I want to magnify God with all my heart. I want to be sincere and heart-felt and genuine in the way I worship or magnify God." That's what Mary was basically saying. She was worshipping with her inner being and with her whole heart.

Third, we magnify God with our lips or our voice, verse 47. Mary “rejoiced in God [her] Savior.” She opened her mouth and proclaimed. How can you be a Spirit-filled and Word-filled Christian and not open your mouth and tell somebody else? How can you keep silent? It comes out of your lips.

Fourth, we magnify God when we trust the Lord as our Savior, verse 47. Mary said, “My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.” That indicates that Mary needed saving, because she was a sinner. So let’s not elevate Mary higher than the Bible elevates her. Let’s not put her lower than the Bible puts her. She was blessed to be chosen by God’s grace to be the mother of the Lord. By the way, she wasn’t the mother of God; she was the mother of the earthly Jesus in His humanity. But Mary was saved by the same grace that we all are saved by. She talked about “God my Savior.” That indicates the deity of Christ, who is our Savior.

In Psalm 40:16, the psalmist says, “Let such as love Your salvation say continually, ‘The Lord be magnified!’” So I’m asking you, “Do you magnify God in your mind, in your soul and spirit, with your lips or voice and have you trusted Him as your Lord and Savior?” Mary passionately worshipped the Lord, and so should we.

Second, Mary purposefully magnified the Lord, and so should we, verses 48-50. “For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.” That’s His nature and character. “And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.”

So we know how Mary magnified the Lord. Now why did Mary magnify the Lord? Number one, because God regards the lowly or the humble, verse 48. “For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant.” The word “maidservant” carries the idea of a female slave, and it also is the Greek word “doulos” for a voluntary, female slave. A doulos was a slave for life and was the property of their master. So Mary was humble, and she said she was a bondservant of the Lord.

It’s a common theme throughout Scripture that God comes to and helps the humble and the broken. Psalm 138:6 says, “Though the Lord is on high, yet He regards the lowly; but the proud He knows from afar.” And “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble,” James 4:6. All through the Scriptures, God comes to the broken and lowly.

The first to hear about the birth of the Savior were the shepherds. Shepherds were on the lowest rung of the social ladder. You could not get any lower than a shepherd. They were so bad that they couldn’t testify in a courtroom. They lied and stole and were considered riffraff. But God went to the shepherds to announce Jesus’ birth, and He went to Mary—to the lowly and the humble.

Psalm 34:18 says, “The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit.” If you’re going to come to God, you’re going to come as a child, humble and dependent. In Jesus’ Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3, started with “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? It means

that you realize you are absolutely, totally, spiritually bankrupt, utterly destitute before a holy God. If you're going to get saved, you have to come broken, humble and with empty hands. We sing:

"Nothing in my hand I bring,

Simply to the Cross I cling."

I like those words. We come to Jesus naked, poor, wretched and blind. I don't come to Him boasting and proud with a list of my achievements, thinking God should let me into heaven. Rather, I come to Him naked, poor, wretched and blind. I say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." God comes to the humble and to the broken.

And Mary's Magnificat acknowledges that. The reason she wants to magnify God is because He so graciously comes to the lowly and to the humble. Are you broken and humble before God? If so, you are the object of His care.

The second reason why Mary magnified the Lord was because of His perfections, verses 49-50. She magnified God because He is almighty and all-powerful, verse 49. "For He who is mighty..."—that's God's power—"...has done great things for me." She makes it personal; the power of the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in her womb. The Bible says, "With God all things are possible," Matthew 19:26. And Luke 1:37 says, "For with God nothing will be impossible."

So we praise and magnify God for His great power. You've got a problem you don't think God can solve? Jeremiah 32:17 says, "There is nothing too hard for [God]." We magnify God for His power.

The third reason why Mary magnified the Lord was because God is holy, verse 49. "And holy is His name." When the Bible uses the word "name," it is speaking of the very nature and character and essence of God. It's not talking about a proper name. God's chief attribute is holiness. If God wants us to know anything about Him, He wants us to know that He is a holy God. God being holy is mentioned more in the Bible than any other of His attributes. And all His attributes—love, mercy, grace, kindness, compassion, justice—are all influenced and tainted by His holiness. Everything God does is holy.

"Well, Pastor John, what do you mean by 'holy'?" It means there is no evil, no darkness in God. "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all," 1 John 1:5. It is impossible for God to do anything evil, sinful or wrong. He is perfectly holy. The positive is that He is righteous and perfect in His very being. So He has the absence of any sin and the presence of all goodness and righteousness. He is perfectly set apart and holy in all of His ways. In Psalm 99:9, it says, "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy."

If you want to be encouraged, study the attributes of God. Acquaint yourself with God and be at peace.

The fourth reason why we magnify God is because He is merciful, verse 50. “And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.” What does it mean that God is merciful? Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve. We all deserve to be in hell because of our sin. “There is none righteous, no, not one,” Romans 3:10. None of us deserve to go to heaven. Before you can be lifted up, you have to be brought down. You can’t come to Christ for salvation until you realize you’re a sinner.

Think about God’s mercy. It’s His mercy why you’re breathing right now, why you’re saved right now and why you have food to eat. It’s His mercy and grace why you are saved. Grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve.

I’ve heard people say, “I deserve a better wife! I deserve a better husband!” You deserve hell. Everything’s uphill from there. “God, you’re so merciful to me.” Then God chooses to grace you—to save you, give you His joy and love and peace and take you to heaven. He’ll give you all the blessings that none of us deserve. So He doesn’t give us what we deserve; He gives us what we don’t deserve. He forgives us by His grace.

The Bible says that God’s mercy is great, Isaiah 55:7. Ephesians 2:4 says, “God...is rich in mercy.” 1 Peter 1:3 says that God’s mercy is abundant. Psalm 106:1 says, “His mercy endures forever.” Lamentations 3:22-23 says, “Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed; because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” Every day you wake up it is a day of new mercies from God. And Psalm 36:5 says, “Your mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens.” In our text, in verse 50, “His mercy is on those who fear...”—or “reverence”—“...Him from generation to generation.”

When I think about the mercy and grace and goodness of God in my life and I think about my children and grandchildren—and if I live long enough—about my grandchildren’s children, I want God’s mercy to go “from generation to generation.” So let’s magnify the Lord for who He is.

Third, Mary prophetically magnified the Lord, verses 51-56. Notice Mary used the phrase “He has,” the prophetic past tense, where she was speaking of what He has done and what He will do. “He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. 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 seed forever. And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her house.” So Mary returned to her own home after three months, and that would take us up to the birth of John the Baptist.

So in beautiful Hebrew poetry, Mary spoke in the prophetic past tense. She also used the past tense to describe what God will do in the future. What has God done and what will He do? “He has scattered the proud,” verse 51. “He has put down the mighty,” verse 52. “The rich He has sent away empty,” verse 53. You talk about social justice! You talk about God balancing things out! God takes care of it all. You look around the world and think the rich are always going to

be rich? No; God brings them down. You think the proud will always be proud? No; God humbles them. You think the mighty will always be mighty? No; God brings them down. Now notice the contrast, in verse 50, "His mercy is on those who fear Him" with verse 52, He "exalted the lowly."

So if you fear the Lord, you get mercy, and if you are humble, you get exalted. God's kingdom is not man's kingdom. God's ways are not man's ways. Man exalts himself; God humbles him. If we humble ourselves, God will lift us up.

Do you fear the Lord? Then He will give you mercy, verse 50. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," Proverbs 1:7. You want mercy? Do you want God not to give you what you deserve? Then fear Him. "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time," 1 Peter 5:6. "He has...exalted the lowly," verse 52. So don't be filled with pride, don't exalt yourself, but humble yourself.

And verse 53 says, "He has filled the hungry with good things." I like that. If you are hungry, He'll fill you up. This is why the Bible says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled," Matthew 5:6. So you must come poor, broken and hungry before the Lord.

Now notice that God always keeps His promises, verse 55. "As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever." This is the Abrahamic Covenant. When Abraham was 90 years old, God told him that he would have as many descendants as the stars in the sky and sand on the seashore, Genesis 22:17. How would you like God to tell you that?! Sarah is 80 and Abraham is 90, but they're going to have many kids!

If that were me, I'd say, "No way!" But Abraham said, "Yes!"; he believed. One of the greatest verses in the Bible on how God saves us is Genesis 15:6, which says, "And he..."—that is, "Abraham"—"...believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." God made a promise, so God provided a Savior, He died on the Cross for our sins, He rose from the dead and God gave you everlasting life.

So what do we do? We say, "I believe." Then we receive. Faith opens the door. Abraham believed God, and God gave him righteousness. We do the same for salvation. We believe God's Word, and God gives us righteousness.

The point in verse 55 is that God keeps His promises. Mary is basically saying through this whole song that God keeps His promises. God promised Abraham and God promised David. God keeps His promises. And God has promised to forgive us our sins and iniquities. God says, "Their sin I will remember no more," Jeremiah 31:34. God has promised you everlasting life. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."—that's Christmas—"...that whoever believes in Him..."—that's faith—"...should not perish but have everlasting life," John 3:16.

If you realize you're a sinner and you repent, you change your mind, you turn from your sin and

receive Jesus as your Savior, God will keep His promise. He will forgive your sins.