

The Song of Mary

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Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 00] Luke chapter 1, and we'll be reading 46 through 55. Mary's song.

And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.

[1 : 13] Let's hear the word preached. I realize we are returning to a passage we heard preached just a few weeks ago, but I'm confident you will not hear the same sermon.

This text has been on my mind ever since, and I don't suppose there is any harm in returning to it. The passage we've just read in Luke 1 is what we often refer to as Mary's song or the Magnificat.

It is really the first Christmas poem in the church's history. Have you ever noticed how much of the Bible is written as poetry?

If you're using an edition of the Bible that puts verses, each verse on a new line, then it won't be as obvious, but at least one-third of the Bible is poetry.

That's a pretty good portion. Glance back at the book of Psalms, for instance. The words are set in stanzas to group lyrics together. Chances are God intended even more of the Bible to be read as poetry, but the style of expression changes.

[2 : 26] Some of it gets lost as it gets translated into languages such as English. So some of that original literary form gets lost. Some of the beauty and the eloquence of the words themselves get lost.

Now, in my mind, it's kind of a shame that the church doesn't necessarily appreciate the creative arts as much as it once did.

For most of church history, believers used various forms of art to convey significant spiritual realities because sometimes words just fail to capture the full essence.

For example, Bible publishers of the past often used very ornate designs when they published a Bible. And perhaps you've seen pictures of some of these if you haven't seen them in person or maybe some recreations.

Their covers were usually very thick, and they had these very intricate, handcrafted details all over the spine and the covers. The pages were filled with illustrations, often hand-drawn, filled with patterns alongside the text.

[3 : 39] They didn't create these plain, black-covered Bibles as we're so accustomed to today. Instead, they used a lot of artistic elements to essentially say, this book is no ordinary book.

This book is special. Just by looking at it, we want you to know it's unique. It is not like anything else you've read. That was the intention behind a lot of it anyway.

That's also the basis for those grandiose architecture that we see in old church buildings and cathedrals. That was the original intention anyhow.

Christians of previous generations didn't construct these elaborate places of worship with a lot of decoration and detail to be symbols of arrogance.

That was not the purpose. They wanted their sanctuaries to reflect the gravity of worshiping Almighty God.

[4 : 44] It should not be taken lightly. And they wanted to remind people of that. They believe the church's building should be considerably nicer than our homes or our businesses because in their minds, and I believe this is true for us as well, what's more important?

Christians have used design to create serious ideas or to convey serious ideas to ourselves and to the world around us.

We've been doing this throughout our history. For example, the Reformers, they preferred large pulpits. If you've ever seen any of those, they seem to tower over everything else.

And that is not to draw undue attention to the preacher himself or to lift him up above everyone else, but to express the centrality of God's word and the preaching of that word in worship.

That was the idea. One of the cries of the Reformation was sola scriptura, scripture alone. Scripture alone is the church's authority. And the Reformers, they used these massive pulpits and very intricately designed lecterns to remind everyone of that fact.

[5 : 59] Every time they sat in the church, they would be reminded of that. Music. That's another nonverbal art form that can express a lot without any words at all.

The book of 1 Samuel tells us that David could drive away a troubling spirit from King Saul just by playing a harp. 1 Samuel 16 says, Whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand.

So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him. If you love music, you probably can relate to this to some degree or another. Just that right melody changes everything.

Remarkably, when Psalm 150 instructs us to praise God for his mighty deeds according to his excellent greatness, it never once tells us to use words. I find that fascinating.

Instead, it says, Praise him with the trumpet sound. Praise him with lute and harp. Praise him with tambourine and dance. Praise him with strings and pipe. Praise him with sounding cymbals.

[7 : 12] Praise him with loud clashing cymbals. We are told to make a joyful noise and even dance around because sometimes, it seems, words just aren't quite enough to communicate how thankful we are for who God is and what he has done.

I often think of some of that dancing we see in the Old Testament as spontaneous as it was as simply an expression of joy that could not be contained.

The body just couldn't remain still. They were so happy, so overjoyed at what God had done. But getting back to music, music is powerful.

It's very powerful. It's both beautiful and it's sophisticated. It's art and it's science all rolled into one. This incredible mode of expression that music is.

And that's especially true when we take the right words and we put it with the right music. You know, when a gifted songwriter can take his or her talent and mold together the teachings of the Christian faith, what we find in Scripture, and mix it with this emotional, beautiful melody, the result can be overwhelming, and we've all experienced it probably right here in this building.

[8 : 31] I grew up under a tradition that disapproved of any kind of choir, any kind of musical instrument in worship. I don't know how many times I heard the quote used, and I have no idea who originally said it.

I don't mind a piano at all as long as I don't see or hear it. That's the tradition I grew up under. And I can remember at times defending that position. I would say things like, well, the church really doesn't need immaculate choirs or instruments as long as we're praising God from the heart, and there is truth to that.

But I also have to ask, why then did David assemble what was essentially a 4,000-man worship band in the Old Testament?

He organized 4,000 men to offer praises to the Lord with the instruments, and he also addresses many of his psalms to the choir master.

But that was Old Testament worship, we may think. Maybe, maybe, just maybe, we are to assume that choirs and instruments were exclusively for use under the Old Covenant.

[9 : 41] Of course, an assumption is all we can make. That's all we can do. Perhaps, though, perhaps the idea of these choirs and all of these instruments that were brought together to worship God were means by which Old Testament saints specifically could offer their very best spiritual sacrifice of worship in the moment.

Giving everything they have, all of their talents, all of the beauty that comes with it. Have you ever heard the term choral anthem? This is something I was not familiar with until a few years ago, and I found out that some churches, they have no choirs, they have no song leaders to speak of, they have no instruments, they don't use any of that when they sing together on Sunday morning.

It's just congregational singing. However, they'll have this one unique song that they sing at the very end, where everyone who plays an instrument is invited to bring out that instrument and to play along.

All of the best singers are moved to the front of the room so it forms this choir. And then the church with the instruments and the choir, they all sing together one, you know, well-written, powerful hymn all together, and they call it the choral anthem.

The idea is that if our worship is an offering to God under the new covenant, then this choral anthem is our attempt to give him our very best in everything we have.

[11 : 18] It's kind of an interesting idea. My point is that all forms of creative art have been used for a long time by the church.

They have been beloved elements of Christianity itself, from ornate Bibles to influential songwriting. The church has appreciated and made use of art to the glory of God.

And we see that even within the pages of Scripture. Do you realize the Bible itself begins with the story of God speaking the world into existence, right?

And we often ask, how can God create something out of nothing? Do you realize that we do this ourselves quite often? It's called creativity.

You take an idea, it comes from nowhere, and it becomes something. Now, granted, God's creativity is vastly more powerful than ours is. But it's creativity nonetheless.

[12 : 26] God is the original artist. Now, what is God's favorite mode of creative expression? That's a pop quiz that you probably did not anticipate this morning.

What is God's favorite mode of creative expression? I believe he loves words more than anything. He loves words. Psalm 33 says, for he spoke, and it came to be.

Hebrews says, he upholds the universe by the word of his power. To thoroughly equip the man of God, he has given us his word. All Scripture is breathed out by God.

Then there is the introduction of John's gospel, which says, In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. So God created the universe with words. He sustains the universe with words.

[13 : 32] He speaks to us through his written words. His one and only son is the word. That is, his son, Jesus Christ, communicates to us all of those attributes and the very will of God, and probably the clearest way we could possibly view it.

For all of the positive things we could say about art in general, literary arts, words, writings, poems, songs, lyrics, they top the list.

Music, paintings, architecture, these things, they can certainly speak to us, but nothing conveys a message better than words. According to Romans 1, we can know the invisible attributes of God by simply studying his creation, by looking at what he has made.

Yet Paul says in Romans 10, How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news. They speak it. They declare it.

People say a picture is worth a thousand words, but I don't think I would trade a thousand words for a picture if I could choose only one. A large pulpit in the church may represent our belief in the authority of Scripture, but not nearly as much as a preacher who faithfully teaches from Scripture's authority week after week.

[15 : 06] Right? A well-designed Bible may signify the exceptional value of the words it contains, but I would much rather have a Christian who reads and believes those words.

That speaks much louder than a nice cover. Art goes only so far without words. And by now you're wondering, What in the world does this have to do with Mary's song in Luke 1?

These are some of the things that came to my mind as I've been thinking about Mary's song. In Luke 1, Mary seems to instinctively know not only the merit of words, but also that God is worthy of theologically rich, eloquently spoken praise.

Her song is spontaneous, but it just flows out of her as though she has spent months preparing this and rehearsing it.

To clarify what I mean, notice what she does not say. She does not say, God, I just want to thank you for this blessing.

[16 : 31] You know, just, You've been so good to me, God. You are so good. Thank you, amen. It's not that at all. I mean, this is just beautiful expression.

She says, 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, for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

I'm sure we can hear the difference, right? In Mary's original language, I suspect this poem was even smoother than what it sounds in English. Regardless, I can't help but notice not only the substance of her words, but also the way she forms them into this beautifully rhythmic passage.

This is spontaneous speech. What's the big deal, we think? Maybe Mary was a gifted lyricist. Maybe that's just the way people talked back then.

What does that have to do with us? I think the answer comes only after we consider how she became so apparently gifted in this moment. It wasn't an accident, I don't think.

[17 : 48] Look closely at these verses. Now, if any of these expressions seem familiar to you, then it could be that you recognize them from the Old Testament.

Mary says, My soul magnifies the Lord, which sounds similar to Psalm 34. My soul makes its boast in the Lord. She says, For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant, which is a direct quote from Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 11.

She says, He who is mighty has done great things for me. Psalm 89 says, Who is mighty as you are, O Lord, with your faithfulness all around you?

She's quoting Old Testament passages, one after the other. You'll also notice how well-versed Mary is in Israel's history.

God 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 estates. Last but not least, she understands the prophecies of God.

[18 : 58] She knows the true significance of God's covenant with Abraham. 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 let me remind you where we're at here. Mary has just learned that God has chosen her to give birth to the Messiah. And she runs to the only person she thinks can possibly relate.

She goes to her cousin, Elizabeth, who, by the way, is about to give birth to John the Baptist, though Elizabeth once believed herself to be barren. And as soon as Mary arrives, Elizabeth knows a second miracle has taken place.

And she excitedly cries out, 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 it's then, instantaneously, Mary begins singing this song filled with references to the Old Testament and articulated with what is, in my opinion, just stunning prose.

[20 : 13] How? Well, most of us, I think, we'd still be searching for the right words when Mary, she's on her third or fourth stanza. How does this happen?

In John chapter 4, Jesus teaches, So true worship has two components here, spirit and truth.

And by spirit, I believe Jesus means worship is more than external rituals or bodily exercise, as the King James renders it. Elsewhere, the Lord says, This people draw near me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.

So Christ insists that our worship come from the heart. It originates in the heart. Also, our worship must be in truth.

It should always be grounded in and guided by the revealed will of God in Scripture. In other words, we need to engage both our hearts and our minds when we worship.

[21 : 40] Our hearts need to feel and our minds need to think. Without one or the other, our worship ceases to be what Jesus defines as true worship. Now, along the way, somebody has probably stressed to you the importance of preparing yourself for worship.

In other words, you don't just show up here on Sunday morning. Maybe you've heard one of our pastors say, Don't just show up. Spend some time in prayer. You know, get your heart ready before you come.

And this doesn't have to start on Sunday morning, by the way. This can happen throughout the week. But prepare yourself. And I believe that's very, very sound advice. I mentioned the book of Ecclesiastes this morning.

I actually preached through that book a few years ago. Did you know it is not until you get to Ecclesiastes chapter 5 that you read the first, what we call, a second person imperative, a command?

Do this. It's not until chapter 5. Up to that point, we have the so-called preacher, whom I believe is Solomon. He's giving a number of first-person observations.

[22 : 52] I observed this. I witnessed this. This is what I've studied. And so on. But it's not until chapter 5 that he gives the first commandment. And what does he say? Guard your steps before you go to the house of God.

Or guard your steps when you go to the house of God. So to put it another way, prepare yourself for worship. Was Mary prepared for worship?

Absolutely. I have no doubts about it. She was so ready, in fact. She didn't need a script. She didn't need months to carefully craft this poem.

She didn't need a copy of 1 Samuel or the Psalms in her hand. She was more than prepared to worship God in spirit and truth when the moment arrived. The words of Scripture, truth, were part of her native language.

This is just what comes out. Her heart, that is her spirit, was just overflowing with thankfulness and joy centered upon God.

[24 : 03] And she was ready to worship in this moment. If this spontaneous praise of Mary isn't enough to impress you, then I'll remind you that Mary is a woman.

I realize that goes without saying, but I think it needs to be said in this context because society treated her as a second-class citizen. In other words, she would not have received any kind of formal training or education.

plus, she may have been as young as 13 or 14 years old. That is very, very plausible.

She may have been as young as 13 or 14 years old, so she would have been a child according to our standards. Yet, she was more capable of worshiping God than most of the spiritual leaders in Israel.

How could this uneducated child, essentially, spontaneously speak with such eloquent prose dripping with the words of God?

[25 : 07] Well, she certainly didn't make any excuses for herself. Despite being a young woman in ancient Israel, she devoted her life evidently to learning and memorizing scripture.

She saturated her mind with thoughts of spiritual things. she had meditated on the promises of God in her heart. And when this moment came, the sound of perfect praise just instinctively poured out of her.

How else do we explain it? So what can we learn from Mary about worship? I'll give you a few points.

First, every one of us, every believer is capable of praising God. Now, maybe our singing or praying could use some improvement, but we can always practice more.

We can always do more to prepare our hearts, to prepare our minds, and we should. We don't just show up here on Sunday morning and check it off our list and go home back to our whatever life we live.

[26 : 14] This is our life. Worship should be our lives. We should get lots of practice Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

And we should want to offer God our very best, which leads to my second point. we should strive to praise God with both substance and beauty, everything that we can possibly offer.

Let's not treat worship, that is singing and praying and reading scripture and other aspects of our corporate worship as a mere science, if you understand what I mean. Okay, we've got the singing done.

Time for a prayer. If the preacher do his thing for a minute, I'll try to stay awake the best I can. God not only created a functional world, keep in mind, he created a beautiful world.

A beautiful world. By God's grace, our praise can be not only an expression of the truth, but also a lovely, very heart-driven presentation of it.

[27 : 25] You know, I love to see people, my grandfather, for instance, was not a great singer. And he would admit as much. But he loved to sing.

And if you looked over at him on a Sunday morning when we're all singing together, he looked like he was having the time of his life and he didn't care who heard him sing out of tune. Third, we may be capable of praising God with both substance and beauty, but only if our worship is in spirit and truth.

Our minds must be immersed in God's word and our hearts must rejoice at all that it says. Believe it. Trust it. In Mary's case, she provides a wonderful example of worship for all of us to emulate.

She displays the right attitude when she says, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. Notice how she exalts the Lord while humbling herself.

That's at the essence of worship. She also directs her worship at the appropriate object when she says, the Lord, God, my Savior.

[28 : 45] She's not worshiping herself, that's for sure. and she's not worshiping some vague religious notion. She is praising none other than Yahweh, the God of Israel, our Savior.

Furthermore, she knows why she is praising God. 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. So if we were to summarize Mary's reasons for worshiping God, we could list at least three things.

[29 : 55] First, she praises God because he who is mighty has done great things for me. God chose her to bring his son into this world, and he could not bestow a greater honor on anyone.

God would be child in her womb would become the savior of people from every tribe, every language, every people, every nation.

Second, Mary praises God because his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. generation. She quotes Psalm 103 to show that Christ will mercifully redeem people from now to the end of time.

And finally, she remembers how this present blessing connects to the past. God has been redeeming his people all along in various ways.

He's been showing what was to come in small examples, I guess, for instance, he saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This is the most notable example of all.

[31 : 10] He has shown great strength with his arm. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy. Mary says he has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

Do you remember God's promise to Abraham? back in Genesis 12, so long before Mary, I will make of you a great nation, God said, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Do you realize how many people throughout Israel's history read that and assumed it applied exclusively to the people of Israel?

But that's not what God said. All families of the earth will be blessed. Paul writes of that prophecy in Galatians 3 saying, this scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, in you all the nations will be blessed.

So then those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham. Now before Paul said that, Mary realizes that this child in her womb will not be an ordinary boy.

[32 : 49] That was clear immediately. She also knows that the prophecies concerning the Messiah, they apply they imply I should say that he will be much more than just a physical king in Israel.

He'll be a king, yes, but he will be the king of kings. He will be lord of lords. His kingdom will reach well beyond the borders of Israel. He is changing the world in a way that we never could.

Mary will give birth to God in the flesh. who will then save countless people from their sins, both Jews and Gentiles.

And based on Mary's words here, she seems to know this. She realizes this. I believe Mary understands Paul's Christ-centered creed in Romans 1 where he says, the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus Christ, our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations.

[34 : 22] Mary seems to grasp what is to come. In her heart, she knows the gospel, she sees what Paul was able to articulate using only 15 words in the original Greek, for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Mary is carrying the one whom the book of Philippians describes as Christ Jesus, who, though he was born or though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself.

By taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

So for all of those reasons, Mary rejoices. She sings this beautiful praise to God because he is worthy of every last word and then some.

If you ask me, I'll tell you the birth of Christ is something worth celebrating. Now I don't fight with the world over claims of Christmas, of this holiday season necessarily.

[35 : 45] I don't necessarily engage in that particular culture war because as far as I'm concerned, December 25th is just one day out of the year. When it comes to celebrating the birth of Christ, I want to celebrate it all year, every day.

I also want to prepare my heart and my mind Monday through Saturday to celebrate it with you on Sunday morning, every week. I want to read about God's incarnation and its many implications.

It's marvelous implications for us. I want to sing about it. I want to write about it. I want to pray because I know Jesus is my mediator.

I want to talk about it. When I'm unwrapping presents with my family on December 25th, I want to reflect on the birth of Christ. And when I go to the Fourth of July parade in the middle of summer, I want to reflect on the birth of Christ.

Christ, no matter what time of year it is, that doesn't matter to me. May we always think about the day when the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

[37 : 00] Furthermore, I want my praise and I want my thanksgiving to fully reflect how I feel in every way possible. I could merely wing my public prayers when we're together, or I could consistently and continually pray throughout the week so that when it comes to my public prayers, they come out a little bit more gracefully and naturally because this has become my native language.

Do you understand my point? I could hope that we only sing the songs that I really like on Sunday morning, know the ones I'm really good at singing, or I could spend my days with my family at home singing those songs that we sing, the ones I'm good at, the ones I'm not good at, just singing all the time because it's good practice and I believe God deserves my best and I want to give him my best.

After all, God so loved this world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Why wouldn't I want to sing about that? Why wouldn't I want to talk about that? If we sing to the glory of God, let us strive to sing like angels.

Now I realize we have physical limitations, but you understand what I mean. We give our best. If we pray to the glory of God, let us hope our prayers can be as beautiful as the Psalms of David.

[38 : 51] If we play music to the glory of God, let us fill the room with sounds of heaven. If we dance to the glory of God, let our movements be like that carefree child who doesn't have a worry in the world because death is swallowed up in victory.

Thanks be to Christ. And if we speak to the glory of God, let our words be rich with the truth of scripture. Let it be known to everyone around us, not that we are holier than thou, but that our minds are fixed on Christ and his gospel.

And people know it when they talk to us. Let our spiritual sacrifices today and every day be the very best we have to offer.

God is certainly worthy. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we rejoice just as Mary did so many years ago.

You have sent us a Savior, your Son, and our Lord Jesus Christ. So today we magnify your holy name. We give praise to you as our exalted King, the God who has fulfilled his promise to Abraham and to his offspring in the person of Jesus.

[40 : 08] Lord, you are a God who scatters the proud and lifts the humble. You bring down the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of low estate. So we come now in, I pray, humility, recognizing our need for the riches that Christ alone provides.

Give to us again and again the wealth of his mercy. Forgive our sins against you. Forgive our sins against others. Cleanse our hands and hearts from all iniquities.

Wash us clean in the blood of our Lord. Lord, Father, you fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. You are a God of provision, a God of protection, a God of promise for your people.

You are a judge to those who oppose your ways and we ask that you would judge the wicked. Send us your son again soon to bring upon the earth an eternal kingdom of righteousness and peace.

And in the meantime, Lord, we ask that you would continue to meet all of our spiritual needs, all of our physical needs. We ask in the way that your son taught us to pray.

[41 : 19] Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

The glory is yours forever. In Christ's name, amen. Amen.