

According to the Promise

Bible Background • Luke 1:26–56; Galatians 3:6–18

Printed Text • Luke 1:46–55 | Devotional Reading • 2 Corinthians 1:18–22

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: REVIEW Mary’s song praising God’s faithfulness; APPRECIATE the faithfulness of God’s people from generation to generation; and EXAMINE areas in our lives where our faithfulness to God can be strengthened.

In Focus

It was Christmas morning, and it was Brenda’s ex-husband’s turn to have the children. Brenda felt so alone. Life just had not worked out the way she had thought it would. She walked into church and Michelle gave her a great big hug.

“Where are the kids?” Michelle asked.

“Their father has them,” Brenda answered, as the tears streamed down her face. “Come sit by me,” said Michelle, as she enfolded Brenda in her arms.

Michelle allowed Brenda to freely cry out of her pain and disappointments. She did not try to console her with words; just her touch seemed to comfort Brenda.

Brenda remembered how her family had once been whole – intact. She vowed that her children would never have to live and deal with the problems of a dysfunctional home as she did. She vowed that she would do all she could to honor God with her marriage. She did all she could, but problems still came into marriage and ripped it apart. No matter what she did or did not do, her husband still chose to leave the marriage. Now, on Christmas Day, her precious little ones were spending time with their dad, instead of with the two of them together. Brenda’s heart seemed to break in two.

God was still caring for Brenda and loving her, even in a very rough situation. God is always faithful. Sometimes we just have to ask God to help us see things from His perspective.

Keep In Mind

“And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour” (Luke 1:46–47, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Magnify (Luke 1:46) megaluno (Gk.) – Root word for “Magnificat,” Mary’s song of praise, which is the first word of Mary’s song in the Latin Vulgate scriptural text, and it means “glorify.”

B. Soul (v. 46) psuche (Gk.) – The seat of feelings, emotion, desire, and affection.

Say It Correctly

Anakims. AN-uh-kims

Chaldees. KAL-dees

Debir. DEE-buhr

Eleazar. El-ee-AY-zuhr

Negev. NEG-ev.

Seir. SEE-uhr

KJV

Luke 1:46 And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord,

47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

48 For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

54 He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;

55 As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

NLT

Luke 1:46 Mary responded, "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

47 How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

48 For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed.

49 For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me.

50 He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him.

51 His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

52 He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.

54 He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful.

55 For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever."

The People, Places, and Times

Angels. Angels are created beings whose primary purpose is to serve God and worship Him. Some angels are used specifically to bring messages to people from God. These angels appear like human beings and are never described as having wings. They are never described as children or women. The angels with wings are the cherubim and seraphim. The cherubim and seraphim never leave the immediate presence of God and are continually worshipping Him. Since angels are created, they have a beginning. They are not all-knowing or present everywhere as God is. They do not marry.

Background

Mary sang the beautiful words of today's Scripture passage while she was visiting Elizabeth, her relative. Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were an elderly, childless couple. They had prayed many years for a child until they reached the age where they no longer expected God to answer this request. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were of the tribe of Aaron, so Zechariah was in rotation for serving at the Temple in Jerusalem.

After Luke's introduction to his Gospel record, he plunges right into the story of the birth of John the Baptist. It was Zechariah's turn to serve at the Temple, a great privilege for a godly Jew. As he went in to burn incense, suddenly the angel Gabriel was standing beside the incense altar (Luke 1:11). Zechariah had the same reaction that all who have ever been visited by an angel had—he was afraid.

After telling him not to be afraid, Gabriel told Zechariah that God was answering his and Elizabeth's prayers for a child, a very special child that they were to name "John" (v. 13). Unfortunately, Zechariah found this hard to believe, and so he became speechless until after the birth of John, their baby. John grew up to be the prophet we know as John the Baptist (or Baptizer).

Word must have traveled, in spite of the lack of modern communication devices, because Mary heard that her elderly relative was now pregnant. Mary was on the other end of the age spectrum, probably only around 15 years old, the age when women of those days usually got married. Gabriel had also visited Mary to tell her that she would be pregnant in the most miraculous way ever (vv. 26–38). Mary was going to give birth to the Son of God and this would be a virgin birth.

Shortly after Gabriel's announcement to Mary, she hurried to see Elizabeth (about an 80-mile hike). As soon as she walked in the door and Elizabeth heard her, baby John in her womb leaped in praise at the presence of the Baby who was growing within Mary. At this time, Elizabeth was already six months pregnant, while Mary's pregnancy had just begun. After Elizabeth had finished praising God for the coming Savior, Mary began singing a song of praise to God that reminds us very much of Hannah's song of praise when she became pregnant with baby Samuel in answer to her prayers. The similarity of Mary's prayer to others in the Bible makes us think that Mary studied Scripture and meditated upon it even in an era when women had little access to formal education.

At-A-Glance

1. God's Personal Blessing on Mary (Luke 1:46–49)
2. God's Blessings on His People (vv. 50–53)
3. God's Faithfulness in Sending the Messiah (vv. 54–55)

In Depth

1. God's Personal Blessing on Mary (Luke 1:46–49)

This stanza of Mary's song sings of how blessed she is. From a worldly perspective, this would seem to be the opposite of Mary's situation. Mary came from Nazareth, a town that was so poor that many of its few inhabitants lived in caves. She was engaged to a very godly man with a respectable job, but now she was pregnant – and not by him. Where are the blessings in such a situation?

First, she rejoices because God is her Savior. Every Christian, regardless of his or her situation, should remember that the greatest blessing is to have God as Savior. Then, thinking upon the news from angel Gabriel, Mary praises God for choosing her for this blessing, in spite of her humble status – she is poor and a woman two things that in that era assigned one to an automatic inferior status.

But Mary does not see her lowly status as a disadvantage in the sight of the Lord. God delights in blessing the ones who are of a very humble socio-economic status, but who put all of their trust in the Lord.

2. God's Blessings on His People (vv. 50–53)

Mary has trust in the Lord showing mercy to His people, because she knows that Scripture details how God had blessed His people in the past. This is more than simple optimism. This is hope based upon knowledge of how God has worked in the past. Based upon how He has blessed His people, Mary knows that He will continue to do so in the future.

As we look closely at the things that Mary sings about concerning how God acts, we see that when Jesus came to the earth, He brought about a moral revolution. He is using His mighty arm to sweep aside the proud. Pride has no place in the Christian, because our standard is Jesus Christ. When we see ourselves compared to Him, we realize how far we are from how God desires us to be.

Then we see a social revolution. Jesus brings an end to the labels and titles that people think elevate them. In the sight of our Lord, the lowest person is just as important as the person with money and power.

Next, there is an economic revolution. Just think about the first Christians in Acts 2:44– 45. No one went hungry in that first Christian community, because the rich sold their riches so the poor could have the basic necessities of life. Probably that ideal community existed for only a short time, but no Christians should go hungry while others have an abundance. We live in a very materialistic and greedy society, but Christians should have a different set of values than that of the world.

3. God's Faithfulness in Sending the Messiah (vv. 54–55)

Mary acknowledges that all these great and revolutionary changes in us can only come about through the coming of the Messiah that God had promised to send. Mary is thinking about God's promises to Abraham, Father of her people; but God promised Mother Eve back in Genesis 3:15 that He would send a Savior that we all so much need (see also Genesis 4:25). God is always faithful to keep His promises, even if we have to wait!

Search the Scriptures

1. What specific blessings does Mary thank God for (Luke 1:46–49)?
2. What sort of people does God bless (vv. 50–53)?
3. What attributes of God did Mary recite (vv. 50–55)?
4. How did God treat the descendants of Abraham (vv. 54–55)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. When Jesus was born, He brought blessings for individuals and for certain groups of people. What sort of people does Jesus favor? Why do you think He reaches out to those who fear Him, and to the poor, the humble, and the hungry? Compare these categories of people to the ones who are blessed in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12).

Liberating Lesson

Mary's song highlights the different set of values that emerged from the birth of Jesus. God is concerned for the people who are on the bottom of society. In what ways can Christians as

individuals bring about some of the things that Jesus came for? How can churches model His values?

Application for Activation

Some people are facing a difficult Christmas. Look around you and see if you can find someone to help before the day is over.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Luke 1:46–55

Introduction

Verses 46 through 55 constitute what is generally known as “the Magnificat” or “Mary’s song.” The song can be divided into three strophes (stanzas). The first strophe, verses 46 through 49, speaks of God’s grace or favor on Mary. The second strophe, verses 50 through 53, talks about what God has done in the life of the people of Israel. The third strophe, verses 54 and 55, is about God’s faithfulness in keeping His promise to Abraham by sending the Messiah.

46 And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord,

47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

We first notice that Mary praises the Lord after Elizabeth, by the Holy Spirit, has revealed to her the mind of God concerning her, confirming what the angel had told her earlier. Overwhelmed with joy and gratitude, and in acceptance of the promise of God, Mary reacts spontaneously and glorifies God. The statement “My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour” indicates a total involvement of the whole of self (emotional and spiritual) in the praise of God. The use of both “soul” and “spirit” underlies this fact. The word “soul” is a translation of the Greek word *psuche* (psoo- KHAY), which generally means self or inmost being. It is the center of and makes up the whole being. The soul is the seat of feelings, emotion, desire, and affection. The word “magnify” in Greek is *megaluno* (meg-al-OO-no), and it means to make great, to extol, or to esteem highly. “Spirit” in Greek is *pneuma* (PNYOO- mah), and oftentimes it is synonymous with “soul.” Here, “spirit” speaks

of the rational, or mental, disposition—the core of the inner being. Mary employs the totality of her being (the soul and spirit) to glorify God in grateful worship of God her “Saviour” (v. 47).

48 For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

In verse 48, Mary gives the reason for her rejoicing and gratitude—God “hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.” This means that God looked upon her with respect, that God showed favor to her, an otherwise insignificant person. Mary calls herself God’s “handmaiden” (Gk. *doule*, DOO-lay), which means female slave. This is the lowest position one can get in Jewish custom. Women and slaves were regarded as the lowest class in the Jewish community of the day. They were relegated to the background, to the place of dishonor. To be both (woman and slave) makes her place even worse; the society has no regard for her. In contrast, God has regard for her. He has looked upon Mary with favor, and has given her a place of honor. The magnitude and extent of her elevation is brought to bear in the person who made it possible, the “mighty” and the “holy” (v. 49).

Here, Mary brings out what systematic theologians call the immutable (i.e., unchangeable) and the incommunicable attributes of God—His omnipotence (all-powerfulness) and holiness. The incommunicable attributes of God are those characteristics that are not true of us human beings and which we lack sufficient words to define. We are not omnipotent (all-powerful) and we can never be. We are not holy and we can never be holy as God is holy. But here we see God, who is so mighty and holy, yet He is able to look upon and have regard for Mary, who is of the lowest class. **Her low estate** is not only because of her person, but also because of her heritage—Nazareth. Nazareth was one of the most insignificant and despised villages in Galilee.

When the apostle Philip told Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph,” Nathanael replied, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’” (John 1:45–46, ESV). In spite of these seeming “disadvantages,” God is able to exalt and honor Mary. She has been tremendously blessed of God, she says. For “all (every) generations shall call me blessed,” which means every generation will acknowledge her as one blessed and most fortunate woman among all women (Luke 1:48; cf. vv. 28, 42). As the mother of the Messiah, Mary is uniquely blessed. We have seen that the first strophe deals with God’s blessing to Mary. She next sings about what God has done in the life of the people of Israel (vv. 50–53).

50 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

Mary brings to bear the merciful attributes of God, His consistency, and His faithfulness. In verse 50, she celebrates God’s mercy on all those who “fear” (Gk. *phobeo*, fob-EH-o) Him, meaning those who venerate or reverence Him. The fear of God is verifiable by the people’s obedience and keeping of God’s Law. God’s mercy is accorded specifically to the people of Israel in keeping with God’s promises, which started with Abraham (Genesis 17:7; 18:18; 22:17). This mercy is demonstrated in the display of God’s strength and power (Luke 1:51–53).

51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

Here are two pairs of contrasting parallels that are the direct results of God's mighty act in the coming of the Messiah. This one act results in the reversal of the human principles of living or thought. By His show of strength, God has completely altered the human view of life in general. The "proud" (Gk. *huperephanos*, hoop-er-AY-fan-os), the haughty, or those who exalt themselves, are scattered (v. 51). The verb "scattered" (Gk. *diaskorpizo*, dee-as-kor-PID-zo) is figuratively used here and has either a military or an agricultural idea in view. In its military sense, the strong, proud army, which relies on its own strength without God, is brought to nothing and is driven and dispersed by a stronger force. In its agricultural sense, "scattered" refers to the winnowing process, where the chaff is separated from the wheat and is blown away (or abroad in the air) by the wind.

Not only are the proud scattered, like chaff, or put in disarray, like an egotistical army, but God has also "put down the mighty from their seats" (v. 52). Here the mighty are synonymous with the proud. They are the "powers that be," the oppressors of the poor, the self-exalted who look down on and tyrannize others. The mighty are deprived of their self-exalted positions, while those who are truly humble ("them of low degree"), the insignificant, are exalted.

In verse 53, the next pair of parallelism starts with the insignificant, "the hungry," which is synonymous with "them of low degree," and associated with poverty. The hungry here describes those who realize their need for God and aspire for spiritual food, those who "fear him" (v. 50). They are fed—"filled . . . with good things" (v. 53)—and are shown mercy (v. 50). On the contrary, those who are "rich," proud, and self-sufficient without God are sent "empty away" (v. 53). This is revolutionary indeed; it describes the purpose of Christ's coming into the world (to change the human view and principles of living). Christ spells out this principle in His Sermon on the Mount, generally known as the "Beatitudes" (esp. Matthew 5:3–6), and teaches the same to His disciples (Matthew 23:12; Luke 11:1–4; 18:14). Mary insinuates God's transformation of society, whereby the proud and powerful are brought low, while the lowly are brought up. Not only does Mary represent the humble who have been exalted, but Nazareth as well, which signifies the revolutionary aspect of God's act through the coming of the Messiah.

Historically, the Old Testament is full of examples of the "proud" and "mighty" whom God, by His infinite power and design, brought down. Examples include Pharaoh (Exodus 15:1–11), Haman (Esther 6:6–14), and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:24–37). The Scriptures include "all proud" and haughty people (Psalm 33:10; 1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6). Likewise, there are abundant examples of the humble exalted by God: Joseph (Genesis 41:16), David (1 Samuel 18; 2 Samuel 7), Mordecai

(Esther 6:6–14), and Daniel (Daniel 1:8–21). The Bible includes all the humble (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:3–6; cf. Matthew 23:12).

54 He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;

55 As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

The third strophe of Mary's hymn reveals God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to Abraham by sending the Messiah. Here, Mary celebrates God's mercy to Israel. Just as He promised Abraham and his descendants, God has kept His promise in keeping His word to Israel and helping them partake in this promise, not forgetting His promise but remembering His mercy. This act of mercy is an old promise (covenant) God made to Abraham and to all his generations after him. It is a living covenant to all humankind that is fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ—the Son of God.

Through this hymn of praise, Mary reveals the excellent nature of God: His divine power and authority over all things both spiritual and human (Luke 1:49, 51); His holiness (v. 49); His mercy and justice (v. 50); and His faithfulness and trustworthiness in fulfilling His promises (vv. 54–55). Through the incarnation of Christ, we realize the omnipotence, holiness, mercy and justice, and faithfulness of God.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God Is Faithful
(2 Corinthians 1:18–22)

TUESDAY

A Faithful Heart
(Nehemiah 9:6–10)

WEDNESDAY

Descendants of Abraham
(Galatians 3:6–12)

THURSDAY

Inheritance through the Promise
(Galatians 3:13–18)

FRIDAY

Jesus' Birth Foretold
(Luke 1:26–38)

SATURDAY

Elizabeth's Blessing
(Luke 1:39–45)

SUNDAY

Mary's Song of Praise
(Luke 1:46–55)