

1. Magnificat: Pregnant with Joy

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn to that song in your Bibles. You'll find it in Luke's Gospel on page 856 in the Visitor's Bibles. Luke chapter 1, and we're going to read from verse 39. Luke chapter 1, 39.

In those days, says Luke, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town of Judah. And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 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 leapt for joy.

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

[1 : 22] 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 from a 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.

And Mary remained with her about three months, And returned to her home. Well, let's ask for the Lord's help before we come to unpack this passage together.

Father God, we thank you for your words about your son. We pray, Lord, that you would help me to speak clearly, And that as we look at these words together, We would encounter your living and reigning Christ, And leave here changed.

[2 : 42] We ask that, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, about three years ago, That book arrived on my doorstep, Which wives tend to be rather excited about, And husbands, I think, tend to view with a little bit of trepidation.

What to expect when you're expecting. A pretty enormous book, Given that up until then, I'd always assumed the answer was rather simple. A baby. But apparently, it was a little more complicated than that.

Well, today's passage is a meeting of two expecting mothers, And their two unborn children. But neither mother expected to be expecting at all.

Elizabeth was elderly and barren. Mary was a teenaged virgin. It's a passage full of the unexpected. And yet, this passage is absolutely pregnant with joy.

It begins with an unborn prophet leaping for joy in the womb. It continues with Mary rejoicing in song to God, her Savior.

[3 : 53] And it ends down at verse 58, With the whole neighborhood rejoicing alongside old Elizabeth. All sorts of unexpected people bursting with joy.

But most unexpected of all, perhaps, is why they rejoice. Pregnancy is always a time for great excitement, isn't it? Just imagine if one of the ladies sitting here today of Elizabeth's vintage Discovered she was pregnant.

Stranger things have happened at the lunchtime service. But there's something Elizabeth finds even more exciting than her own news.

I'm not sure I've ever met a pregnant mother who could say that. But in verse 42, this expecting pensioner squeals with joy for somebody else.

For another woman's child. This is Advent in a uterus. An embryo who the whole cosmos has been waiting for.

[5 : 01] And to this childless old lady, Elizabeth, His coming will be a greater reason to rejoice, Even than the tenderness shown to her.

And even Mary, when it's her turn to sing, Has more to be excited about than her own news. Oddly enough, even she sings nothing specific about her own child.

What matters to her now is what the Lord is about to change, Not just in her life, But for the lives of all people and all generations. So what is it these two women find so exciting?

And can it rejoice us? Even those of us who are sick of Advent before it's even begun? I hope so. Let's look at three unexpected things Luke is telling us about this Advent fetus And his heavenly father.

Firstly, what happens when these two mothers with their two unborn children First meet in verses 39 to 45? Luke's message here is that this embryo Is a king To greet with joyful homage.

[6 : 16] Four times Luke mentions Mary greeting or coming to her elderly relative, Elizabeth. And I suppose we can only imagine how eagerly she'd been waiting to see her.

Back in verse 31, The angel had given this young girl that earth-shattering news That not only was she pregnant, But that she was pregnant with the Christ, The everlasting king.

And although she'd listened with faith, Mary had clearly been terrified. I'm not surprised. And so as a gracious confirmation of what she'd heard, The angel told her about Elizabeth, her cousin, That she in her old age was also expecting.

And at that of course, verse 39, Mary had raced from Nazareth All the way to the dangerous hill country of Judah. A long, rough journey.

But at the end of it was The only woman in the whole world Who might be able to share in her terrifying excitement. Well, at the sound of Mary's greeting, Two things happen.

[7 : 29] A baby somersaults in the womb And his old lady mother screams with excitement. It's John the Baptist's first ever prophetic act. He's Elizabeth's unborn son, The last prophet of the Old Testament age.

And back in verse 17, His father had learnt That John would be the one to usher in Christ's kingdom. He'd be a prophet like Elijah, Who even from the womb, Verse 15, Would be filled with the spirit.

And now as these two babies come together, For the first time in history, A prophet of the old covenant Would meet the one in whom His whole message was about.

And if you've ever wondered What an unborn child looks like When they're filled with the spirit, Verse 41 tells us The spirit provokes Just the same response in baby John As he does in every one of us Who's ever met the son of God.

He makes him leap for joy. Today we talk about Unborn children reaching viability. And the moment I caught my breath last week Was when one writer described The Lord Jesus here as Not yet viable.

[8 : 52] Just think of that. The eternal second person of the Trinity As a fragile cluster of cells. And yet, Hidden in the darkness Of his own mother's uterus, John recognises that cluster of cells As the son of God.

And so said this writer, John the Baptist Was the only child Ever to use the womb As a pulpit. It's remarkable, isn't it? But more remarkable still Is what Elizabeth does.

Her husband's already been told That their child Will have an extraordinarily Privileged ministry.

And as he moves inside her In response to Mary's voice, She must realise that this is it.

Her son's ministry Was to point to the Christ. And she recognises that Even now, He's doing it. And so Elizabeth does The only appropriate thing.

The mother of the last ever prophet Becomes the first ever Christian disciple. Why is it granted to me, She cries out, Verse 43, That the mother of my Lord Should come to me.

[10 : 13] What an extraordinarily Humble thing that is For a pensioner To say to a teenage girl.

And what a sight it must have been To see a delighted old lady Bow down in joy Before an embryo.

And yet what Elizabeth Shows us here Is just what Every Christian Ever since has done Whenever they recognise The son of God With joy And bewilderment And often with tears We come to know

Jesus Christ As Lord As the most Significant person In the universe That's what makes A Christian disciple Isn't it?

It's someone who recognises Jesus Christ As their Lord And Master And that's what Elderly Elizabeth Becomes the first human being To confess And Luke has written this down So that we can have Absolute certainty That it's true So that like Elizabeth We can recognise the Christ And rejoice at his rule She was overjoyed Simply at his conception But we can look back On the whole of Luke's gospel His birth His life His crucifixion For our sin His resurrection And ascension To the throne So how much more reason Do we have To rejoice When we come to know him I can be a proper Misery gut About Advent With its endless carols And mince pies And sentimentality But it is hard

To be a humbug When you remember What Advent Is reminding us That Christ Is A king To greet With joyful homage A Lord Who visited His people And even as an embryo His disciples Could not help But bend the knee Before him And when he comes again You and I Will do the same He didn't come For our admiration He came for our worship And obedience And if we've given him That now Then like Elizabeth And like baby John We will greet him Full of joy Well we've met The last prophet And the first Christian disciple And now when it comes To Mary's turn to speak We get the first hymn Of the Christian church Today we call it The Magnificat Words spoken

By a poor Country girl And still sung Every evening In the grand cathedrals Of the world What Luke Loves to do In his gospel Is slow down The story To listen in To these songs From his characters Hearts Only he gives us These hymns And they teach us Don't they That the way We respond To God's Redeeming mercy Is in song And heart Not just Intellectually And the interesting Thing about Mary's response Is that It's very different To the way We tend To praise God This supposedly Uneducated Peasant girl Has a far Richer theology Than most of us Because she's been Schooled in worship By the scriptures Her song is Crammed full Of the songs Of the old testament And it isn't Primarily A song

[13:57] About Her In fact It doesn't even Explicitly mention Her baby Every verse Is about What God Has done He has He has His mercy Now that's Not to say That it's Impersonal She rejoices In God My savior Right from the start Mary Knows this God Doesn't she But just like Elizabeth She also knows Exactly what is Special about Herself She was blessed According to Elizabeth In verse 45 Simply because Unlike Zechariah She believed God's words About Christ Mary is blessed Because of Where she stands In relation To Jesus And so her song Is not about Her But about Her God Elizabeth Pictured him As lord And king And now Mary will Describe him As savior And mighty Helper So secondly This king To be greeted With joyful Homage Is also Savior Verses 46 To 50 A savior Who is Magnified By the Ordinary My soul Says Mary Magnifies The lord What she Wants to do In response To this Thrilling meeting With her cousin Is magnify Or enlarge Our view Of god That's Unexpected Again isn't It Normally a Big person Magnifies A little Thing But here Is a Young Timid Girl Magnifying The living God It's just The first Sign that This is Going to Be a Very Topsy Turvy Kind of Song Because God Is Magnified When Lowly Otherwise Insignificant People like Mary Reveal His Tenderness

And his Mercy That's why She calls Him her Savior Mary knew Didn't She Just as Well as Anyone Else That there Was Nothing Immaculate About Her She Needed A Rescuer But God Had Stooped Down And Looked Verse 48 On her Otherwise Overlooked Lot in Life And so Mary's Privilege Would be To Incubate Salvation For all Generations Everywhere How did Plain Ordinary Mary Become the Most Painted Woman In History Well Simply Because She Was A Humble Young Believer Verse 50 Who Feared The Lord There's Not a Hint Of Pride In Mary Is There And That Is How God Has Always Been From Generation To Generation He's A God Who Shows Mercy To Those Who Fear Him Who Bow Humbly Before

Him And Obey His Gospel Of Grace Well Is That How We Think God Is Most Magnified I'm Not sure I Always Do In Practice I Tend To Think That If I Get More Impressive God Will Get More Magnified If I Secure A Good Position In Life I'll Be To Use To Use To I Moved Last Year Into A Lovely House And I Comforted Myself Constantly By Saying That The Mortgage Would Be Worth It Because I'd Be Able To Use It For Ministry And Of Course It's True It's Great To Be Able To Have People Around For Lunch But Does God Need An Impressive House For Me To Make Him Look Impressive Mary Showed Just How Impressive God Really Was By The Way He Treated Her In Her Smallness And Insignificance She Feared Him

And He Exalted Her He's A Saviour Who Is Magnified By The Small And The Ordinary And Finally In Verses 51 To 55 Mary's Song Reaches Its Upside Down Conclusion He's A Helper Who's Needed By The Proud These Last Few Verses Seem Like An Odd Way For Mary To End Don't They Why Would A Girl Like Her Be Concerned With The Fates Of The Proud And The Rich Of Kings And Rulers Well I Suppose Her Own Taste Of God's Grace Had Given Her An Understanding Of How His Kingdom Ticks This Is God's Gospel Program That's What She Saying by Starting Each Verse With That He Has This Is What His Agenda Looks Like And I Guess Mary Knows Just How Hard It Is For

[18 : 59] The Proud And To To To Be And Bow Down Before Another Lord Of Course Mary's Heart Verse 51 Had No Overblown Thoughts Of Grandeur At All There Were Precious Few Imaginations Of Her Heart To Be Scattered She knew just where her place was, didn't she?

And she rejoiced because of it to trust her savior. But I have to say that is not the case for many of us. Why is it, do you think, that we don't tend to flow over with the same sort of gospel joy that Luke is so full of?

I'm sure some of it has to do with our culture and our temperament. But might it not also be that we're just a little bit too secure and full of ourselves to appreciate how much we need Christ's mercy?

I was educated at a public school in England. There's probably never been a more privileged upbringing for a child than that. And we were raised with all sorts of lofty imaginations in our hearts. We were being trained to be the captains of industry and finance and law. And we'd leave chapel or RE lessons with hopes of being the next Luther King or Gandhi.

[20 : 23] Men like that were the ultimate expressions of virtue. But the truth is, even those sorts of dreams were really self-aggrandizement. Not gospel magnification.

And some dreams have to be shattered. And in his mercy, the Lord did shatter the pride of one or two of us.

But not many. I think it is very hard indeed for most of us content, satisfied Westerners to magnify somebody else.

But that is the only way God will have it. His gospel overturns our values, doesn't it? The mighty are brought crashing down. The hungry are fed and the rich are sent empty away.

And Mary sings all of these things as if they were done already. Isn't that strange? It still doesn't look like this is the way the world works, does it?

[21 : 25] The mighty seem as mighty as ever. But you see, Mary has a firm grasp of God's gospel promises. Because this is how God has always been, isn't it?

Lifting up the undeserving. That's how he'd always dealt with Israel. And her child was the very blessing promised all those years ago, verse 55, to Abraham.

So if God has delivered on that promise, then she knows without a doubt that everything God has ever said about the Christ and his kingdom was good as done.

God has dealt this way with people for all eternity. Lifting up the humble and scattering the proud. And it's how he'll deal with every one of us at the end.

It's just how he works. So I'd be pretty foolish, wouldn't I? To hope that he'd change his practice just for me. He's a helper for the humble.

[22 : 35] It's one of the great descriptions of God in the Psalms, the helper of Israel. The one who, in his mercy, verse 54, stoops down constantly to help his sinful servants.

And perhaps we don't like to think of ourselves as needing help. But God sees us as lost, frail creatures who can't do without him.

The rich and the proud, just as badly as the humble and needy. All the way through his gospel, Luke is dividing the proud and the humble.

Perhaps you can picture two people doing their Christmas shopping. You know how it is, don't you? There's two days left and you're getting desperate. And in your panic, you wander into that shop where you just know you don't really belong.

And the shop assistants, they can just sniff you out, can't they? Here comes another hopeless husband looking for the price of the smallest thing they sell. And then in through the door, Walter's a woman who clearly does belong in a shop like that.

[23 : 46] In fact, you'd think she owned the place. And all she has to do is snap her fingers and she gets exactly what she wants. In the world we live in, someone like that walks through the door.

And what happens? The shop assistants come running. But God says, get out. Many of us who would never have the means to do our Christmas shopping like that, still expect God to treat us like the rich customer.

We'll take his goods, but not his grace. We'll take the Christmas carols and baby Jesus and we'll take our health and our wealth, but we won't have his rule.

We won't have Christ. And the promise of Mary's song is that if we're not careful and we let our wealth and our security ruin us, then he will throw us down from our thrones.

Isn't it a wonderful thing when you meet a rich man who can say the same as Mary? Who am I that the Lord has looked on my humble estate and helped me?

[25 : 08] Well, he came in the flesh, a king who was greeted with joy, even as a baby in the womb. A savior for the lowly and the sinful and the overlooked.

So let's not be too proud this Advent to accept his help. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for looking down on our helplessness and sending your son to rescue us and to lead us.

Help us, Father, to come to him with empty hands and be filled with good things through his cross. And so let our ordinary and unimpressive lives magnify you and your gospel of grace.

In Jesus name. Amen.