



## “My Soul Magnifies the Lord”

Luke 1:26-55

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Pastor Nick Shaffer

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Much is being made these days of the “War on Christmas.” And to be honest, the overactive attempts to dismantle and remove every possible connection to Christianity or to Christ at this time of the year, real or imagined, borders on the laughably deranged. Everything from HOA’s removing nativity scenes to one local government that ok’d nativity scenes as long as they were minus the baby Jesus. Even the Salem VA had a proposed ban on Christmas trees and the singing of any Christmas carols that mentioned “Christ” or “Christmas.” I don’t know how that all ended up, but it has gotten almost absurd.

What is all of this about? Why such hostility to Christmas? There is the typical rhetoric of “inclusivity” or “religious tolerance,” or “equal representation,” or whatever else, you know, about a holiday that is specifically about the birth of **Christ**. But the truth is that the real root of this hostility is faithlessness, profound blindness, willful spiritual ignorance, and the captivity of the soul to the slavery of sin. It’s a rejection of Jesus Christ as Lord.

But faith causes the opposite response. Faith causes you to sing, to rejoice, to delight, to exult when you think about the true message of Christmas. And of all of the songs of Christmas, this one that we are looking this morning is the first, sung by the person who was most intimately involved in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Mary of Nazareth. One of, if not **the** most astonished and surprised people in the history of mankind was the young Jewish woman named Mary, chosen by God before the foundation of the world to carry and give birth to the only begotten Son of God.

The redemptive plan of God, the eternal wisdom, the saving power of God, centered in His Son, came to the earth, piercing the darkness of sin through a redeemer conceived in the womb of a Jewish peasant girl. It’s astonishing, mysterious, extraordinary – but it really

happened. This is no fairytale. In a small, nondescript town called Nazareth, something of heaven touches earth as the fulfillment of ages of prophecy, the promise of a Savior, a promise as old as the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden, comes to fruition. God's Savior was coming, the One who would make an end of sin, who would destroy the works of Satan, who would save the helpless, repair the broken, supply the deepest needs of the needy, who would cleanse the corrupt, redeem the rebellious, and forgive the ungodly. The grace and the wisdom of God is written over this moment in bold relief. That's what Christmas is about. Let's look at this incredible text together this morning -- and I don't have an outline for us -- I just want us to breathe these words in together this morning. Let's try to put ourselves in this moment a little over 2000 years ago. Start reading with me in verse 26:

***“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” (Luke 1:26–30, ESV)***

Try to put yourself in this moment. Mary's whole world, her whole life, is changed -- in an instant -- by God's grace. That's the central theme. Notice the words that Gabriel uses -- “favored (literally “graced”) one... the Lord is with you (in a special gracious way)... Do not be afraid, you have found favor (literally, “grace”) with God.” Whatever is taking place here -- and Mary still doesn't know -- it is rooted in the kindness, the goodness, and the grace of God.

What led up to this encounter? The answer to that is nothing. Mary was walking through life like any other person of her day. Life for Mary has been in all respects, as far as we know, ordinary and yet Mary is on the verge of an encounter with heaven, with God, with His plans, which is going to change her life, because she has been chosen by God for something unique in all of history.

I have often wondered what Mary was doing when Gabriel showed up. By default, we probably picture this scene as happening while she was in prayer, or while she was meditating, maybe kneeling by her bed with a shaft of warm, yellow light coming from heaven, dust mites floating in the air. But the truth is that she could have been doing just about anything. Remember too that when we open this story, Mary is betrothed to Joseph to be his wife. They are in the customary period of time between their engagement and their marriage when Joseph would be preparing a house for them and Mary would be planning a wedding. All we know is that in the midst of her everyday routine, an angel shows up, and not just any angel...it is Gabriel, the messenger of the most high God. This is just so earthy and otherworldly at the same time.

Gabriel greeting is filled with words of grace but Mary's response at first is halting. ***She was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.*** That's an understatement if there ever was one. This is shocking, unsettling to say the least. Her mind has to be swimming. What in the world does this all mean? Why is there an angel in my house? Why is he speaking to me? Why am I not dead? Obviously she is afraid, right? Who wouldn't be? But the words of Gabriel, the messenger of God, have an amazing affect on her troubled soul.

***“And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.””*** (Luke 1:30–33, ESV)

Instantly, as amazing as this is, Mary understands what this is all about. These were not strange and puzzling words, not that they were not overwhelming – they were- but they were very clear to Mary. They would have been to any faithful Jewish person living in that century. They are taken straight out of the Old Testament, words that say to Mary, in effect, "You have been chosen by God's grace. Out of all the women of Israel, you, in this time and this place, have been favored by God to bear the Messiah, to bring into the world the One whom Israel has so long expected. You are the one He has chosen to do that." What an awesome privilege!

There is nothing here to indicate that Mary was chosen for this task of bearing the Messiah because of any particular piety or holiness of life, any merits of her own or anything she has done. She did not earn the privilege of being the mother of the Messiah. She was a vessel chosen by God's grace, chosen long ago, to be the mother of the Son of God.

How do you respond to this? What is the right reply, the right answer? How would you react? What would your reaction be if you were an unmarried, poor, young woman living in an insignificant, economically depressed and oppressed part of the world, and you were greeted one day by an angel who told you that you had been chosen by none other than God himself to have His baby?

I find Mary's response remarkable. Once she recovers from the initial shock, she asks a simple question, not from a lack of faith, but borne out of a sense of wonder, surprise, and simple biology. ***“And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?””*** (Luke 1:34, ESV) "How can this be? I don't have a husband. How can I bear a child?" And it is then that Gabriel speaks to her of the power of God.

***“And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.””*** (Luke 1:35–37, ESV)

He responds to Mary's question with beautiful poetry, describing God's mysterious provision for the conception in the womb of a virgin. He says that the power of the Holy Spirit of God will come upon Mary, will overshadow her, literally, will envelop her. The Holy Spirit would achieve the impossible, and she would conceive the Child of God by a miracle. Not an earthly king, but the very Son of God in the flesh. It dawns on her that “Son of the Most High,” wasn't just a title for the baby; it was actual. The Messiah really would be God in the flesh. The child she was being asked to bear was no mere man but God.

Conceived and fashioned in her womb by the Spirit of God, the child to be born will be called "holy," perfect, unique, free from all sin. "For nothing is impossible with God." Literally he says, "For no word from the Lord shall be void of power." God calls life into existence and calls creation into existence by simply speaking it so, the angel says, "No word of God shall be powerless."

What was this going to mean for her? We know that Mary was contemplative. She thought things through. Scripture testifies to that fact. And when she heard these words, she thought through what it meant for her. This was not, like Hannah the mother of Samuel in the OT, the answer to years of pining for a child. She was not longing for a son. This would mean some difficult things for her. The only virgin birth in history – Mary knows what this means. She knows people will have a difficult time believing her claim to be pregnant by and through the Spirit of God. She has to think that Joseph will probably leave her. She knows her friends, neighbors, and family will most likely brand her as an adulteress. She knows she faces mockery, gossip, slander, perhaps even death by stoning. She was facing being cast away and disowned by her father as a disgrace to her family. She was being asked to give birth to the "Son of the Most High" which is something no one else has ever done. There are a lot of answers that we could imagine she might have given.

But her answer is unequivocal. It is unambiguous, unmistakable, and clear. It is the answer of faith. God's words through the angel are met with conviction and faith. The more I think about this, the more I am awed. ***"And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her."*** (Luke 1:38, ESV)

There are two things her answer shows me. First she understands who she is before the Lord. She basically says, "I am your slave, I am willing to be what you want me to be, to do what you want me to do. I surrender everything I am to you alone. Have your way with me. I am yours to command."

The second thing this shows me is her obedience to the revealed truth of God. She says, "Let it be to me according to your word." It is not the experience of the angelic appearance that grips Mary. It's not the spiritual rush we may imagine, no emotional ecstasy because she is in

the presence of an angel. No, hers is a thoughtful, obedient response to God's revelation through Gabriel.

Her response begs the question, “What glorifies God?” What really glorifies God? I would tell you that above all else, it is just this -- simple trust, obedience and submission to God. That is what Mary showed. Trust and obedience and a willingness to sacrifice for her God. Now, I know some people who would say, “Who wouldn't say “yes” to an angel? How can you turn an angel down?” The logic behind such words is that it would be easier to believe and obey God if a heavenly being, or perhaps God himself, spoke to us. Nice-sounding words, but they are just words. The fact is God's Word is God's Word, whether it comes through an angel, an apostle, a prophet, or a pastor. God's Word is God's Word. If we are unwilling to accept it from a pastor, from a fellow Christian, or when we read it in the Bible, we will also be unwilling to accept it from an angel or some other heavenly messenger. Mary believed God, trusted God, and trusted His Word.

Not that this was not going to be hard, difficult, trying – it was going to be all of those things. God's grace turned her world upside down. Her response of faith to God was just that, faith. God didn't give her the blueprint for how things would go. He didn't promise that Joseph would stick by her side – he did, or that everyone would understand – they didn't, or that those things were even the most important things. There is an immature theology that so many of us follow that says if something causes duress or distress, that it cannot be God's will. It's not true, beloved. The moment that Mary said yes to God the circumstances of her life got a lot harder. But you know what else? Her experience of God's grace got much greater and the birth of the Savior she so desperately needed, that this whole world desperately needs, that you and I so desperately need – was confirmed.

And it is this personal response from Mary to the grace and the promise and the word of God that leads to this incredible expression of worship, of praise, of exultation that we read before this sermon. That's what the real and true response of faith to God's grace and truth does in the heart of the one who truly believes.

It is not enough to hear God's message, Mary shows us that we need to embrace it and when we do I want you to see what will happen in us. The same thing that happened to

Mary when she went to see her much older cousin Elizabeth. ***“In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in 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 leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.””*** (Luke 1:39–45, ESV) That’s a pretty amazing greeting, isn’t it? But notice Mary’s response. She doesn’t even respond directly to Elizabeth, does she? Instead, in humility, she begins to unashamedly worship God. She isn’t the star of the story, the God who keeps His promises, the God who saves, is. One of my professors in seminary, Calvin Miller, writes, “Once you really know God, the importance of your own identity will lose its stranglehold on your soul.” Listening to this song of Mary tells you that she got that.

All that she can express and feel; all that the mind can comprehend is focused in one direction, magnifying God.

***“And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,”*** (Luke 1:46, ESV) She just starts worshipping God, unashamedly – it’s like she has been waiting for someone to share this with. Mary extolls and praises and celebrates God. Mary does this, not in lip and word only, but with her whole heart and soul, with every bit of power and strength that she has. As she thought about the words of the angel Gabriel, as she considered the implications of the Messiah coming into the world, as she pondered the fact that God had chosen her for this great honor, as Mary came to grips with what was going on, as she considered the graciousness of God, His faithfulness to His people, the child that she was carrying, the hope of Israel in her womb, it captured her mind, it captured her emotions. It saturated every part of her inner being and it bubbled over. She overflows with praise to God.

When Mary says that her soul magnifies the Lord, she uses a verb in the present tense that expresses continuous action. Literally she says: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and will go on magnifying the Lord.” Why would she do that? Because she is worshipping God her Savior. Look at it.

**“And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” (Luke 1:46–47, ESV)** Mary’s praise was rooted in her understanding that our God is a saving God. He sent His Son into the world to save sinners. He was manifested to save us, to deliver us from sin. And Mary needed a Savior just like you and me. Mary knew God was holy and that she was a sinner in need of a Savior. And she was worshiping because the Savior was coming, through her.

She offered soul-felt praise because the Redeemer was coming, the one who would bear her sin, the one who would fill all the law, who would set the captives free. And that's where worship starts. That's what motivates it. That's what causes it, when you personally experience the saving reality of Jesus Christ. As we worship together that’s the chief thing on our hearts and on our minds, isn’t it? God has been gracious to us. He has redeemed us by His Son. We have something to sing about. God sent His Son to save us, to die in our place, to give us forgiveness and eternal life. We have something to sing about, something to rejoice in, someone to worship. **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17, ESV)** Mary magnified God as Savior.

She magnifies His sovereign grace. **“For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;” (Luke 1:48, ESV)** Mary is overwhelmed by the thought that she has been chosen by God.

She is in awe of the sovereign, life-creating grace that fell upon her. She was chosen to be the Messiah-bearer. For centuries the people of God had been waiting for this day. In every generation people had been speculating that it might be in their day that he would come and crush the head of the serpent, but now at last the set time had come, and he would come through Mary. God chose her for this and Mary is astounded.

But here’s the thing – we who are Christians, all of us, are the chosen of God. All of us who were once sinners, debtors to God, slaves of sin that had run us into debt with God that could never hope to pay, stripped of our original glory, clothed with rags, filled with disease, cast into prison, helpless, hopeless, poor, miserable – but God has remembered. He has looked on our humble estate and He has given a Savior for us. We of all people, just like Mary, are blessed.



***“For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” (Luke 1:49, ESV)***

This is intensely personal. When Mary considers the incarnation of the Son of God, she celebrates the might of God and as she is looking for ways to celebrate the works of Mighty God, all she can say is “His name is holy.” It sums up everything that she thinks about God. He is like no other, He has no rival, has no comparison. That he would undertake to save His people in this way – astonishing.

***“And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” (Luke 1:50, ESV)*** His mercy and His lovingkindness are for who? Those who fear Him, who reverence Him, who are in awe of Him – the true worshippers. Oh beloved, mercy abounds from heaven, but it is to those who humble themselves before the Lord, and these streams of mercy never ceasing calling for sounds of loudest praise. Mercy flows from the throne of God from one generation to another; all those who fear him receive mercy,

And then, after this verse, Mary’s song shifts a little bit. All of a sudden, all of the verbs are in the past tense. Now I want you to see this, because it is important. This song was not sung 34 years after Jesus was born. This is not a song that remembers events of the past, it is a song of faith. Faith that looks forward. Mary did not know the details of how her Son would save the world, she simply believed God’s Word that said He would. As she thinks about the implications of the incarnation, about the wonders of what God will do through His Son, Jesus, she speaks as if it has already happened. What does she say?

***“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;” (Luke 1:51, ESV)*** Did God show strength in Jesus Christ? Absolutely. The incarnation of Christ, the miracles of healing, the miracle of feeding the five thousand, raising people from the dead, preaching with authority and power – those are all demonstrations of power. But the greatest demonstration of power was the crucifixion of Jesus, His willing sacrifice of His life for the sheep only to take it up again on the third day. In His perfect holy Son, Jesus Christ, God demonstrates power to save His people which He does by His own arm, for His own glory, being mighty to save.

Did Jesus scatter the proud? God always resists the proud. Think about the proud Jews who imagined that Messiah would be born of the noble and the rich, who believed that He would be a temporal king with an earthly kingdom who would make them rulers with Him of the earth. For God to bring forth His son from a humble virgin from the backwater town of Nazareth did not fit the imaginations of their minds and so they rejected Him to the utter damnation. That the Son of God would die on a tree and redeem His people from the curse of sin by becoming a curse in our place is a stumbling block to the proud and foolishness to the self-promoting. The cross always scatters the proud.

**“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;”** (Luke 1:52, ESV) God brings down the proud, the mighty in their own eyes. He takes down the ruler of this age – Satan – and he lifts up the humble, those who know their need for grace. He delights to do it.

**“He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”** (Luke 1:53, ESV) Mary is not talking about food here. She is talking about people like Simeon and Anna, who longed after Messiah to come, who longed after redemption in Israel and lived to see it. She is talking about the man filled with the legion of demons to whom Jesus gave a life worth living – the woman caught in adultery given forgiveness and love – Mary Magdalene – Peter the betrayer – Paul the persecutor. Those who long for sins forgiven and thirst after righteousness, who long for communion with Him, for a greater knowledge of Him, for those who want to be more like Him, who pant after His word and His instruction – these are filled sooner or later with the thing they desire – Christ and all His goodness, love, joy, peace, and satisfaction.

The rich, those who have no need, who see no need, who are rich in their opinion of themselves, in their opinion of the works of their hands, who are filled with themselves; God sends them away empty. Their lives are filled with vanity and ultimately empty, strangers to the promises of God.

Why does God do all of this? Because as Mary knows Him to be, He is the God who keeps His covenant promises. **“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”** (Luke 1:54–55, ESV) If this will grip your heart as it should, we must realize that God does not have to enter into a covenant with sinful man. There is nothing in his being necessitating that he stoop down and promise salvation to anybody. But the truth is, God did just that. He entered into a covenant with Abraham, promising to show mercy to him and his descendants by granting them salvation and he confirmed it throughout the OT.

So in response to His covenant, His promises to David, Jacob, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and host of others, but in particular to Abraham to make of him a great nation and to bless all

the nations through Him, God acted. Out of the heart that God has for His people, he has sent a Redeemer, a ransom, in His love, mercy and compassion.

God keeps his promises. He does not forget. Spurgeon in reflecting on God's promises says: **If Christ did swear to bring me to Glory and if the Father swore that He would give me to the Son to be a part of the infinite reward for the travail of His soul, then, my Soul, till God Himself shall be unfaithful, till Christ shall cease to be the Truth, till God's eternal council shall become a lie and the red roll of His election shall be consumed with fire, you are safe! Rest, then, in perfect peace, come what will! Take your harp from the willows and never let your fingers cease to sweep it to strains of richest harmony. O for Grace from first to last to join the Virgin in her song!**

Just listening to this Magnificat, you get a glimpse into the heart of a real worshipper and follower of the Living God. You hear worship that issues forth from her faith and her obedience to the message of God. Let me just tell you that she was able to worship God like this because she had literally presented her body to the Lord as a living sacrifice, her womb to carry the only Son of God. Her obedience was the doorway of her praise. Her hymn was an overflow of a life of worship, a communion of intimacy with the Lord, a life of submission.

Mary reminds me here of a story I heard about Handel. On one occasion an orchestra presented Handel's "Messiah" so beautifully that the applause was thunderous, and everyone turned toward the composer. Handel stood up and with his finger pointing upward, silently indicated that the glory should be given to God rather than to himself. That is exactly what the virgin Mary did as she talked to Elizabeth. It is as if she were saying, "Don't praise me, but magnify the Lord who is my Savior."

With that in mind, I ask you this morning; do you have the same heart that dwelled in Mary? Does that heart of worship, borne of profound gratitude for God's grace to you in giving to you Jesus Christ as the answer to your personal spiritual need, does that heart dwell in you today? Can you say with Mary, **"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 who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."** (Luke 1:46-49, ESV)

At it's heart, Christianity, faith in Christ is a very personal thing that must be publically expressed. Mary shows us that today.

I want you think about that tonight, beloved, as we are gathered together to worship Christ. I want us to think seriously about the power of a people gathered together to worship Christ like this and the intense effect it can and will have on those around us.

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