

Wheelerburg Baptist Church 12/16/12
Luke 1:46-55 “The Songs of Christmas”—part 1**1

Brad Brandt

Main Idea: We learn how to respond to Christmas by pondering Mary’s response in her song in Luke 1:46-55. Mary shares about two subjects.

The Setting of Mary’s Song... (26-45)

I. Mary shares about herself in this song (46-49).

A. She praised the Lord (46-47).

1. He is worthy of honor.
2. He is her Savior.

B. She shares why she praised the Lord (48-49).

1. She praised Him because of what He did for her.
2. She praised Him because of what will happen to her.
3. She praised Him because of His name.

II. Mary shares about the Lord in this song (50-55).

A. She reflects on His mercy (50a).

B. She reflects on what He has done (51-55).

1. He has performed mighty deeds.
2. He has scattered the proud.
3. He has brought down rulers.
4. He has lifted the humble.
5. He has filled the hungry.
6. He has sent the rich away empty.
7. He has helped Israel.
8. He has kept His promise to Abraham.

Make It Personal: Questions to ponder in light of Mary’s song...

1. What do we learn about Christmas from this song?
2. How can songs help us appreciate the Lord more fully?

Emmanuel. God with us. That’s what we are celebrating this time of year, the day when God entered humanity as a man and came to live with us.

A century and a half ago, Charles Spurgeon reflected on the significance of this word *Emmanuel*, and had this to say:

“Emmanuel...God with us.” It is hell’s terror. Satan trembles at the sound of it; the black-winged dragon of the pit quails before it. Let him come to you suddenly, and do you but whisper that word, “God with us,” back he falls, confounded and confused. “God with us” is the laborer’s strength; how could he preach the gospel, how could he bend his knees in prayer, how could the missionary go into foreign lands, how could the martyr stand at the stake, how could the confessor own his Master, how could men labor, if that one word were taken away? “God with us” is the sufferer’s comfort, the balm of his woe, the alleviation of his misery, the sleep which God gives to his beloved, their rest after exertion and toil. “God with us” is eternity’s sonnet, heaven’s hallelujah, the shout of the glorified, the song of the redeemed, the chorus of angels, the everlasting oratorio of the great orchestra of the sky.²

What do you think of when you think of Christmas? Probably many things. Of course, there’s the trip to Bethlehem, the no occupancy inn, the manger scene, the humble birth account of Jesus the Savior, the shepherds, the giving of gifts, and so on.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelerburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ Series developed from a Wednesday evening Bible study done at WBC in December 2004.

² C.H. Spurgeon

How about songs? Do you associate Christmas with singing? One of my childhood memories associated with Christmas is gathering at my grandparents' home and joining my aunts and uncles and cousins as we gathered around the piano and sang the songs of Christmas. We have an entire section in our hymnbook with the heading "*Jesus Our Savior: His Advent*," and another, "*Jesus Our Savior: His Birth*." Over the years many songs have been written to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child, and even unregenerate folks know and sing many of these songs.

Did you ever wonder why we sing at Christmas? Is it simply tradition? Actually, there is biblical precedence, and this morning we're going to begin a two part mini-series entitled, "*The Songs of Christmas*." The Gospel writer Luke actually records four songs in Luke 1-2, songs associated with the birth of Christ. There's...

Mary's Song—Luke 1:46-55

Zechariah's Song—Luke 1:67-79

The Song of the Heavenly Host—Luke 2:13-14

Simeon's Song—Luke 2:28-32

We're going to look at these four songs (Mary's this week, and the other three next week) and ask God to use them to help us respond appropriately to the coming of Emmanuel. The truth is, when the true meaning of the incarnation grips your soul, it puts *a song in your heart and on your lips!* That's not all that it does, but it's certainly at the heart of what it does.

Let's turn to Mary's song, which is in Luke 1:46-55. Before we look at the song itself, let's consider the familiar setting.

The Setting of Mary's Song (26-45)

Take a moment and scan through verses 26-45. What do you see? It's familiar to most of us. In fact, you'll hear these details in most children's Christmas programs (and a reminder, our children will be telling us the story tonight). What is the background for Mary's song? Here's what Luke tells us...

⇒we're introduced to an angel named Gabriel (26a); it's the same angel that appeared to Zechariah earlier in the chapter with the news that his wife was going to bear a son to be named John (19)

⇒we're introduced to Mary (26b-27): Luke tells us that she lives in Nazareth in Galilee, that she is a virgin, and that she is pledged to be married to a descendant of David named Joseph.

⇒God sent Gabriel to give a message to Mary (28). What was the message? "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." *Emmanuel*.

⇒The angel told Mary she was going to give birth to a very special son (29-33). What specifically did He tell her about this son? That He was to be named Jesus, that He will be great and called the Son of the Most High, that the Lord God would give Him the throne of His father, David, that He would reign over Jacob's house forever, and that His kingdom would never end.

⇒The angel even gave the details of how this supernatural conception would occur (34-37), explaining that the Holy Spirit would come upon the virgin Mary, that the power of the Most High would overshadow her, and that consequently, the one born to her would be called the Son of God.

⇒The angel revealed to Mary that her relative Elizabeth was six months pregnant (36-37), and emphasized, “For nothing is impossible with God.”

And how did Mary respond to the angel’s message? She responded in two ways. First, she *said* something. Then she *did* something. And then she *said* something else. First, she said something in verse 38. She gave this amazing display of faith, replying to Gabriel, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” How would she ever explain the circumstances of her conception to a cruel world? She couldn’t. She would bear the world’s scorn all her life. But she said, “May it be so. I am the Lord’s servant.”

Then she *did* something. She went to visit Elizabeth in Judea (39-45). She hurried there, in fact, and when she entered her relative’s home, the baby inside of Elizabeth leaped, and the Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth and she spoke to Mary, and exclaimed, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished (42-45)!“

At that point, after saying something and doing something, Mary *said* something else. The NIV heading calls verses 46-55 Mary’s “song,” although the text doesn’t specifically say she sang these words. Verse 46 states, “And Mary *said*.” Over the years it’s been called *The Magnificat* because in the Latin Vulgate the opening word is *Magnificat*, which means “glorifies.”

Why is this passage called a song? Did Mary actually sing it? In terms of literary structure it is poetic with parallel lines. The *NIV Study Bible* calls it a “hymn,” says it’s “one of four hymns preserved in Luke 1-2, and explains, “This song is like a psalm, and should also be compared with the song of Hannah (1 Sa 2:1-10).”³

So in the least, Mary said something very poetic. Did she sing? We don’t know. If she did, the Spirit didn’t inspire her tune, just the lyrics, the same for the other songs in the Bible. In the Bible we have words and lyrics, but not sounds and melody. What does that tell us about the significance of the *lyrics* of the songs we sing?

There are two movements in Mary’s song (or poem, if you prefer), indicated by the pronouns she uses. The first section (46-49) is full of first person singular pronouns (“my” and “me”) while the second section uses the third person singular (“His” and “He”). Let’s ponder the first movement of Mary’s song.

I. Mary shares about herself in this song (46-49).

Notice the pronouns in verses 46-49, “And Mary⁴ said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state

³ *NIV Study Bible*, footnote, p. 1535.

⁴ The NBD offers this explanation of a textual variation: “Believing ‘Mary’ (Lk. 1:46) to be the secondary reading, some commentators accept the less well-attested reading ‘Elizabeth’ (*cf. Creed*). It may be that Luke originally wrote simply ‘she said’, and that both ‘Mary’ and ‘Elizabeth’ were attempts of copyists to assign the song to a particular person. The reading ‘Mary’ became universally accepted. Scholars are divided on the question of whether the contents of the hymn are more suitable to Mary or Elizabeth. The episode which forms the setting is, however, transitional from the annunciation to the birth stories; it stands in close conjunction with the former and continues its Messianic theme. Most probably, therefore, Luke viewed it as *Mary’s* song regarding Christ. Ellis, E. E. (1996). *Magnificat*. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (D. R. W. Wood, I. H.

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.”

Verse 46 begins, “And Mary said.” Said to whom? Apparently, to Elizabeth, and to a listening John in the womb, and perhaps to Zechariah. Notice what she said (or sang), two things...

A. She praised the Lord (46-47). “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Specifically, Mary mentions two things which prompted her to praise the Lord.

1. *He is worthy of honor.* I say that because of the verb choice, “glorifies.” You don’t glorify something that’s common. You glorify something that is worthy of such attention. Although Mary probably said it in Aramaic, Luke uses the Greek verb *megalynei*. It means “to make large, to honor highly, to praise the greatness of.” That response says something to us about Mary, that she is a God-fearing young woman, but it also says so much to us about Mary’s God. He is worthy of honor.

2. *He is her Savior.* “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” What is significant about the words “my Savior” coming from the lips of Mary? She entered the world the same way you and I did, and in the same condition. She was a sinner who needed a Savior. The Roman Catholic church refer to Mary as “the mother of God.” With such language it’s easy to ignore that she was a sinner who needed a Savior, just like every other descendant of Adam.

Friends, Mary needed for the One she was carrying to save her, just like you and I do. Let this sink in. If Mary needed a Savior, Mary, the person God chose to be the human mother of the glorious God-man, then you can be sure that you and I need a Savior. No one becomes part of God’s family without knowing God as *God my Savior*. No one goes to heaven without knowing God as *God my Savior*.

And not just knowing, but *rejoicing*. Mary didn’t just know God academically. She says she *rejoiced in God my Savior*. That’s the mark of a person who’s truly been saved. He or she *rejoices* in the One who did the saving. The Savior becomes their greatest joy in life, above all the trinkets the world has to offer, and even above all of God’s other gifts, like family and job and possessions.

Mary praised the Lord because she treasured Him above all else. But Mary shares something else about herself in this song. In very specific terms...

B. She shares why she praised the Lord (48-49). She identifies three reasons in verses 48-49, “*For [here’s reason one] he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on [here’s reason two] all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—[here’s reason three] holy is his name.*”

Notice the first reason...

1. *She praised Him because of what He did for her.* And what was that? “He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.” We live in a world that applauds those who applaud themselves. Athletes do it. Politicians do it. We all do it to some degree. We tout ourselves so others will notice us.

But God applauds the humble. “This is the one I esteem,” says the Lord in Isaiah 66:2, “he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6).”

That's what He did for Mary. He gave this unknown, very poor peasant girl from the obscure village of Nazareth *grace*, the unmerited favor and privilege of being the mother of His incarnate Son. And for that she praises Him!

2. *She praised Him because of what will happen to her.* And what's that?

She says, "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me." What will people in the future call Mary? Not *worthy*. Not the *Mother of God*. Not the *Holy Queen of Heaven*. Not the *Mother of mercy*, nor many other unbiblical titles that some church traditions use. Friends, that's not the proper view of Mary. She's not God's mother, nor the queen who rules and dispenses grace in heaven, nor is she the mother who supplies mercy to God's children. She was just a woman, depraved, saved by grace, and used by God woman.

But she wasn't *just* a woman. The best way to think of Mary is with the word she herself used in her song. "From now on all generations will call me *blessed*." Not *worthy*, not *intrinsically better than other saved sinners*, but *blessed*. That's what Mary was...*blessed*. Blessed by God, and acknowledged as such by all future generations.

How should we view Mary today? She did something no one else has ever done and will ever do. She was chosen by God to be the woman through whom His precious Son entered the world as a man. She bore the God-child. She nursed that child. She stayed up through nights with that child. She clothed Him, and cleaned Him, and later took splinters out of His fingers after His first day in the carpenter shop, and later helped him learn to read, and took him to the synagogue. And when He grew up she went with Him other places, to a wedding in Cana, and ultimately, of course, to stand at His feet as He bled and died on the cross. And she saw Him in His glorified state too, after He left the tomb alive, and she worshipped Him, too, as did the others who saw Him.

And what should we say of her this morning? That she's the giver of mercy and our intercessor in heaven? No, those positions belong to her Son alone. But she is indeed a *blessed* woman who deserves our honor and respect, and while not our worship, certainly our recognition and appreciation.

Mary expressed a third reason for praising the Lord.

3. *She praised Him because of His name.* "Holy is his name," says Mary.

Why does she mention the attribute of His holiness? Because His holiness is His central attribute. To say God is holy is to say He is one of a kind, in a class all by Himself. To say His name is holy is to affirm His exclusivity, His uniqueness, His unrivaled authority and position. Here's yet another reason why it's unthinkable to exalt Mary to some deified status. That place is already taken, as Jeremiah the prophet exclaimed, "No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you."

This is what I call a *God-centered song*, so let's learn from this blessed woman this morning. Let's follow Mary's example and give praise to the One who alone deserves our praise! He's done great things for us, too, hasn't He? No, we didn't bear His beloved Son. That assignment was hers alone. But just think of the great things He has done for us—He chose us in eternity past, He saved us from our sins, He blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly realms, and He's given us privileged assignments, too, jobs to perform, places to serve. And for all this He deserves our praise!

But the song isn't over. After sharing about herself in the first movement of the song, Mary goes vertical in the second movement, and looks *up* and *out*.

II. Mary shares about the Lord in this song (50-55).

Notice the pronoun switch from the first person to the third person in verses 50-55, “*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.”

I want you to remember something. The person who said that is a young woman, probably in her teens. Amazing. Mary has a deep knowledge of her God, as evidenced by the insightful things she has to say about Him in this song. First of all...

A. She reflects on His mercy (50a). Answer this. Who benefits from God’s mercy, according to Mary in verse 50? “*His* mercy extends to those who fear *him*.” And that wasn’t just true in her day. *From generation to generation*, says Mary. Do you want to experience the mercy of God? Then fear Him. Not be afraid of Him, as if He were an unpredictable tyrant, but *fear Him*. That is, revere Him. Treat Him as the One of a kind being that He is. He is not on our level. He is high and lifted up, which is what makes the incarnation so amazing. *God with us*. He wouldn’t be *with us* had He not lowered Himself and humbled Himself. But He who did so, deserves our respect, our *fear*.

Do you fear Him? If so, He extends His mercy to you. He promises *not* to give you what you deserve from Him. Thirty-three years from the day Mary sang this song, her Son was on His way to the cross where He took what we deserved. That’s why He came, to die in the place of rebel sinners, to remove God’s deserved wrath, to open the floodgates of His mercy.

You can’t earn His mercy. You must receive it by faith alone in His Son alone.

You say, “What does God’s mercy look like in action?” It’s a beautiful thing, and Mary sings about it beginning in verse 51.

B. She reflects on what He has done (51-55). And not just done for *her*, but for others too. In the following lines of her song Mary actually looks beyond herself and expresses the Lord’s works in behalf of others. Yes, the Lord had just done some things for her personally, but she thinks back and reflects on what God has done in ages past for other people. She sees His present work (through her life and the Son she is carrying) in light of His past works for His people.

And so Mary praises God for eight past actions...

1. *He has performed mighty deeds.* Verse 51—“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm.” Which mighty deeds might Mary have in mind? There are a lot from which to choose, from creating the universe, to redeeming the nation of Israel, and countless deeds in between. Mighty deeds!

2. *He has scattered the proud.* “He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.” I’m not sure which scattered proud people Mary has in mind. Perhaps His own people, the children of Israel, who time and time again turned their haughty necks away from serving Him, so that He scattered them among the nations to get their attention.

Pride is a serious sin in God's eyes, my friend. And though God is patient, in His time He will take action to deal with the proud, the *scatter* them.

3. *He has brought down rulers.* "Rulers from their thrones," says Mary. Like Pharoah. Like Nebuchadnezzar. Like a host of other pagan rulers. And like Ahab, and like Jeroboam, and a host of other apostate Jewish rulers. The Lord has brought down rulers.

Why is this truth of special importance to Mary? Because the angel just told her that her Son was going to rule, and that means all other rulers must be taken off their thrones. That's His place, His alone.

But in His track record, the Lord didn't just bring down the proud. Fourthly...

4. *He has lifted the humble.* That's what He did with Hannah, and with Ruth, and with Rahab, all humble women, as Mary well knew. It's also what He did with unknown shepherd boy named David that He turned into a king. The Lord lifted up the humble over and over, and it's what He's now doing with Mary.

5. *He has filled the hungry.* "With good things," says Mary in verse 53. Mary picks up a phrase from Psalm 107, where the psalmist talks about how God rescued some desert wanderers, who were hungry and thirsty, until they cried out to the Lord, and He delivered them and took them to a city where they could dwell. "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things (Psalm 107:8-9)."

But there's more on His resume, number 6...

6. *He has sent the rich away empty.* God is not anti-money, but He is anti what often happens to people with money. It's so easy when you have money to stop trusting in the Lord and begin to trust in and live for yourself. Do that, and He will send you away empty, maybe in this life, certainly in the life to come.

When Mary looked back at her own ancestors, she saw that story again and again. Perhaps she had in mind the book of Judges. God sent His blessings, her ancestors became rich, they turned from Him, and He sent them away empty, time and time again.

7. *He has helped Israel.* Notice verse 54, "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful." Note the emphasis on God's mercy again, and notice its connection to Israel. Israel was not better than any other nation, but it did receive mercy. When God saw Israel, He remembered to be merciful. And Mary sings about that mercy.

We should too. Forbid that we should ever take His mercy for granted.

8. *He has kept His promise to Abraham.* "Remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever." And of course, that's what this promised Son Mary was carrying was all about, the fulfillment of the promises God gave to Abraham and then to Abraham's descendants.

Mary knew that she was a part of something much bigger than herself. Has that truth gripped your soul? Friends, God doesn't just save individuals. He saves individuals and turns them into a chosen people. That's what He did with Israel in the Old Testament. That's what He's doing with the Church under the new covenant. You enter it individually, but you cherish it collectively.

Think of that. You enter the church individually, and so you must be born again. But forbid that you should live life your Christian life individually. We're to cherish our life in Christ collectively. That's why you need a local church. You need to show in

very practical terms that you know that you belong to something much bigger than yourself.

Again, friends, that's something we tend to forget. We tend to view every situation in life with only *ourselves* in mind. Just think how different our lives would be if we had Mary's perspective, if the songs we sang weren't just about ourselves, but were first all about the Lord, and then all about His people.

So ends Mary's song. According to verse 56, "Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months [apparently until John was born] and then returned home." And you know the rest of the story.

Make It Personal: Questions to ponder in light of Mary's song...

I want to give you a couple of questions to think about and to discuss with your families and friends over lunch today. Here's the first...

1. *What do we learn about Christmas from this song?* We obviously learn that while there are a lot of side characters in the story, there should only be one in the limelight. And we need to make sure He is. But what else? Talk about it together.

2. *How can songs help us appreciate the Lord more fully?* Mary sang a song. So did some others as we'll see next week, the Lord willing. But don't wait. Sing the songs of Christmas this week. Sing them meaningfully and gratefully.