

What Child Is This? Song of Virgin Mary

by J. Glyn Owen

Mary's song, the Magnificat, is a hymn of praise to God for His great acts of power and mercy, and for His covenant with Abraham and the fathers.

Duration: 46:14

Scripture: Luke 1:39-65, Luke 1:68-79, Luke 2:14, Luke 2:29-32

Topics: "Birth Of Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Mary's song of praise, known as the Magnificat. The speaker describes how Mary's soul magnifies the Lord, making the unseen God great in the sight of those who hear and understand. The speaker also highlights how Mary, a young woman from a humble background, was given an understanding of God's deeds and purposes throughout history, particularly the covenant made with Abram. Mary's song reflects her personal joy and gratitude for God's faithfulness and the great things He has done for her. The speaker encourages listeners to meditate on Mary's song, worship with her, and make it their own.

Transcript

I'm sure you will find it helpful if you have your New Testament open before you that we should be turning together to Luke chapter 1, verses 39 to 56. Luke chapter 1, verses 39 to 56. The Song of the Virgin Mary is our main theme, though, as we shall see in a moment, we are presented with that song in a given context, and we shall have to be looking at the context as well as the content of this remarkable Song of the Virgins.

Now, before we come to that, I think it is right and proper to say that this chapter depicts the dawn of a new age, and we should not be astonished that, just as birds sing in the early morning, so too God's people have always been singing at the birth of a new age. The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ was singularly marked by occasions of singing and of song. Have you noticed them? We have so many.

We have the Beatitude of Elizabeth, which comprises part of our subject this morning, from verse 42 to verse 45. What we refer to as the Magnificat of Mary, verses 46 to 65. Later on, in verses 68 to 79, we have the Benedictus of Zechariah.

Then we have the Gloria of the Angels, in chapter 2 and verse 14, and the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon, in chapter 2, verses 29 to 32. It seems that the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ sent the world a singing. And

it is equally true to say that if the same Lord Jesus has come into your heart and mine, he has brought with him a new song.

For when Jesus comes into the heart, there begins the song of hope and of joy and of gladness. Now, the announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel of her pending role in the birth of the angel referred to as the Son of the Most High, who would occupy the throne of David and rule forever, verses 31 to 33. That experience had been stunning in its effect.

You imagine, Mary, a young girl from the backwoods of Judea, from Nazareth, ordinary little township or village from which no one of any repute ever came. And here is this little young, I shouldn't say little, but this young country girl, hearing the angel say to her that she is going to give birth to the King who is of the lineage of David and who is going to rule on the throne of David and of his kingdom, there is going to be no end. It's no wonder that about the only thing that Mary was able to do on that occasion was to ask a question or two and then to say this, probably with her hands up in the air, just like this, Well, Lord, let it be to me as you say, but I don't understand it, but if you say so, I'm your obedient handmaiden.

And that's about all she could say. But now she's been meditating and she's been thinking and, dare I say, she's been dreaming. And she's been pondering over these things, as we were told earlier in the chapter.

She kept these things in her heart and pondered over them. And by this time, she's got much more to say. And her feelings and her attitude has become somehow, oh, so, so, so, so ordered that she is the supreme worshipper in this whole drama that relates to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, as I've said, before we come to the substance of Mary's song, we've got to look at its setting. Now, don't let that prosaic statement put you off. The setting here is as significant and as awe-inspiring as the song itself.

I'm not detracting from Mary's song. I don't mean to do that. Please don't take that as a hint.

It isn't meant to be. Mary's song is one of the most beautiful songs ever uttered. But I want to say to you that the setting is as awe-inspiring as the song.

And my prayer this morning is this, that I can share with you something of what I think I see in this, that we too may exult in the Lord our God and worship and anticipate the remembrance of our Lord's incarnation and his birth of the Virgin with new light in our heads, in our minds, and a new sense of joy and glory in our souls. First of all, then, the setting in which Mary's Magnificat was first heard, verses 39 to 45. Now, actually, Mary's song, the Magnificat as we speak of it, was a response to Elizabeth's beatitude, coming from the word blessed art thou, beatitude.

And this forms the heart of the passage before us, verses 42 to 45. But Luke would have us note the circumstances that serve to inspire Elizabeth's greetings as well as her actual words. Now look, first of all, at the occasion in question.

Verses 39 to the beginning of verse 42. Let me read them again. At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judah, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leapt in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice, she exclaimed. Now we'll come to that later.

A little knowledge of the background and a little imagination will help us here. I want you to think of Mary's predicament, in the light of what you've already considered, of how the angel came to Mary and announced to her that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. I want you just to imagine her predicament.

The angel said to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and that holy thing that would be conceived in her would be none other than the Son of God. Her first predicament was how to explain these things to Joseph. She was betrothed.

She was engaged, and engagement in those days was as sacred as marriage. The moment you become engaged, then the bond is sealed, in a sense. And if you were found to be unfaithful after your engagement, then the consequences in that ancient society were very grim.

I don't want to go into the details. How is Mary going to explain to Joseph that she was pregnant? They've kept themselves pure. They've kept themselves apart physically.

There have been no relationships between them that could emanate in an offspring. How is this young girl from Nazareth, who had found it reticent to speak about these things anyway, how is she going to explain to this man to whom she's engaged that there is already farming in her womb a fetus? Do you know God is a great God? Oh, the greatness of God. God graciously met the problem.

Mary couldn't. God could. God did.

Now, Luke doesn't tell us all about that. Matthew does. Matthew presents a brief summary of the delicate issue of Joseph's dilemma and its ultimate resolution.

Let me read from Matthew 1, verses 18 and 19. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother, Mary, was pledged to be married to Joseph.

But, before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, he's called her husband simply on the basis of their engagement. About a year after the engagement, he would come and take her to live in his own home, and she would be acknowledged publicly as his wife.

But she is called his wife, or rather, he is called her husband right here, though they were only engaged. Because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace. He had in mind to divorce her privately.

Now, think of Joseph for a moment. He was utterly puzzled and bewildered. I have no doubt that Joseph knew Mary rather well before he proposed to her and before he had meant to make her his wife.

And it was all so inconsistent with what he knew about Mary that here she should be already pregnant with a child in her womb, according to her. But, not only was Joseph concerned, Joseph was a godly man. And he was the puzzled, what can he do? He's got to do something.

What can the man do? What would you do in a situation like this? He was a just man. And if the girl has done wrong, well, then something ought to be done about it. But, put her to an open disgrace and possibly to stoning, that he cannot do because he loves her.

And here is the dilemma between the justice of the man and the love of the man and his compassion for Mary. Into that situation God comes. Oh, God comes in the most remarkable moments and at the most remarkable times, always at the right time.

Then God acted, Matthew chapter 1, verses 20 and 21. But after he had considered, oh yes, what did he consider? He considered that he should put Mary away privately, make no fuss about it, tell no one about it, but end the whole affair. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, to Joseph now, in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. How stupendous! The God who intervened to announce certain things to Mary, finding Joseph utterly puzzled and bewildered, not knowing what to make of it all, the same God sends a messenger with equal authority to convince Joseph of the reality and of the divinity of the thing that was taking place. God's counterpart providences.

God never does things in halves. Our God is a great God. He who convinced Mary that the thing was of God, convinced Joseph that the thing was of God.

So the first problem was resolved. Mary had a second problem. Now, you don't see it referred to as such in the Scriptures, and yet I believe it is clearly there, it's reflected there.

And it may be the explanation of something significant in our passage this morning. I'm referring to this. I'm referring to the unsympathetic and perhaps very skeptical attitude of all and sundry to the explanation that Mary would give of her condition.

Can't just imagine it. What would her father and mother say to this young girl? I don't know how old she was, somewhere between 18 and 25. What would her father and mother say to her when she broke the news that she was expecting a baby? Now, I've not doubt but that they loved her and they trusted her and they knew something about her character.

And God would not choose a woman out of character for this holy business. And I've not doubt but that they knew that Mary was a good God-fearing girl. But could you believe this story? You parents of 19-year-olds and 20-year-old girls, however much you love them and however much you trust them, what would you say and how would you react if your daughter came to you and said, I am pregnant of the Holy Spirit? Or whatever mom and dad would say, what about the folk next door? I don't know whether I'm over-exercising my imagination, but I imagine that in a few weeks' time the folk next door will be talking under their tongues and they'll be saying, something queer gone on next door.

Mary's expecting. Where has she been? What's she been doing? I thought she was betrothed to be married. I thought she was a loyal girl.

I thought she was a good girl. I thought she was a pure girl. We thought she was such a different girl from this.

But oh my, can't you hear them? And I can hear a whole hubbub passing through Nazareth, going from street to street and wherever Mary comes, people are looking. You know, God dealt with this too. Hallelujah.

Oh, He's a great God. When God announced to Mary that she was going to be the mother of the Son of God as far as His humanity was concerned, He said, look Mary, there's a distant cousin of yours living in the hillsides of Judea. You know her well enough, but He doesn't give her address.

The wife of Zechariah, Elizabeth. She's had a miracle in her life too. Now, not quite like yours.

Somewhat similar, but yet different. Yours is altogether unique. But you know, she's old in years.

And everybody's called her barren because she couldn't have a child. But Mary, listen. Something big's happened to her too.

In her old age, she has a child already formed in her womb, and she's expecting the child to be born. And Mary puts two and two together. Blessed are those who can take the Lord's hints.

What is the Lord telling Mary? Mary, there is one person that can empathize with you. There is somebody that can sympathize. There is somebody else that knows my doings and my dealings with her along this very same level.

Physically, in terms of bringing a child into the world. And Mary had a good long chat with Joseph. And between them, they decided that the best thing for Mary to do, while she could, was to pack her bag and go to the hillsides of Judea and make for Zechariah.

And there she comes into the home of the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, where she sang her song. Now, that's the background. That's the occasion.

But we've got to go a little further. Mary's welcome at Elizabeth's home. Mary arrived unexpectedly.

He don't have a telephone. He didn't have telephones in those days, and certainly the post wouldn't be much use even if you had one. I send postcards home when I go away, and I find that I'm always home before the postcards come.

But Mary arrived. No one was expecting her. I don't know whether she knocked at the door or whether she simply walked in, but the response to Mary's greeting was significant, because upon hearing Mary's greeting, we are told, now listen, we are told by the inspired word, that the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Now, there is nothing very significant in the fact that six months old fetus in its mother's womb should leap, should move. That's very ordinary.

But there's something significant about this. Mary interpreted it in this way, as the response of the fetus in her womb to the babe in the womb of Mary, concerning whom she hasn't been told a word to date. As if John the Baptist that was to be born of Elizabeth's womb is already saluting with joy the Messiah that is to emerge out of Mary's womb.

But that's not the only thing. Don't simply dwell on the physical. That in itself is significant, but there's more to it than that.

Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit, I'm sorry, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Now, if you ask me such questions as this, how do you know she was filled with the Holy Spirit? Or more important, how did other people know that she was filled with the Holy Spirit? I can't tell you, period. And I'm not going to try to

guess, period.

But I do know that they say that she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and it must have been evident to those present that she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Those were sacred moments when these two women met, one much older than the other. And they began to empathize with one another, and marry the younger woman with all the fears, and all the unexpected problems, and all the unrealized dreams, and all much else that was going on within her, finds at last that here is a woman who is endowed by God with the fullness of the Holy Spirit, to whom she, the young stripling, could open her heart, with whom she could talk, from whom she could have some guidance, and with whom she could have sympathy.

Our God's a wonderful God. But then we come to the climax of this, of this part of the welcome. And I believe that the climax is found here.

The Spirit-filled Elizabeth responded to Mary's greetings with words which are most significant. Let me just refer to two or three things quickly here as we pass on. Elizabeth called Mary blessed, blessed among women.

Elizabeth called Mary's unborn child blessed. And it would seem even before she was told of her conception and pregnancy. You see, Elizabeth being filled with the Holy Spirit immediately responded to Mary, to Mary's greeting in this way.

And she hadn't as yet been told Mary's story. Probably then one evidence of the fullness of the Holy Spirit was the fact that she prophesied. She knew what was going on in Mary's womb.

And she knew that Mary believed that God would fulfill what He had promised. There was this insight of the Spirit. Those may have been some reasons why it was known that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

But Elizabeth spoke of Mary as, and here is the climax of everything. Why then, she said, is the mother of my Lord coming to me? Elizabeth was so filled with a sense of her own unworthiness. She says, why is the mother of my Lord? Can I change the word for a moment? Why is the mother of my God coming into my humble house, in this humble place whose address we're not given because it was somewhere in the backwoods of Judea? Why is the mother of my Lord? What is she saying? She is saying this, that Mary is to give birth to one who is divine.

And then Elizabeth announced a second beatitude upon Mary. She's already announced one. And the second beatitude is a very personal one because of her evident faith in God's promises.

Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished. Verse 45. Now that, in brief, is the unparalleled setting in which Mary responded with her song which we are to refer to, or which we do refer to as the Magnificat.

Now let's come to the song itself. I can only bring out some of the main threads in this song. Now I trust that as you meditate upon it in the quietness of your own homes, you will be able to worship with Mary and with others who have pondered over these words throughout the years.

Mary's glorious hymn is not easy to analyze or to subdivide. But we shall take the simplest and the most natural approach. We're more concerned with the spirit of the singer than to divide and subdivide and see things in order.

And one thing is very evident. Mary starts with the more personal things. And then she moves out and she sees things going on around her in history.

And she goes right back ultimately to God's covenant and to God's promises which she sees behind everything that has happened throughout the ages and is happening within her own very body and her own very spirit at that point. But get the principle before we go to the details. Here is a young woman who's given an understanding of things.

Here is a young woman coming from the backwoods of beyond. And she's given an understanding of what God was doing in her day and had been doing throughout the centuries. And that behind all God's deeds and all God's grace and all God's purposes was a covenant to Abram and to the fathers.

And he was keeping his covenant. I say to you this is a sacred moment. Mary knew that and she sings on account of it.

Now let's just notice a few things. And Mary said, My soul praises 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. The Virgin Mary's whole being is ablaze with a sense of wonder and amazement at God's great acts of power and mercy as they related to herself in the first place. Though as we shall see she thinks of others too.

Encouraged by the evident empathy of Elizabeth and even more by the confirmatory experience of being addressed by the spirit-filled Elizabeth as the mother of my Lord. Even before Mary had unbosomed her great secret that was something out of this world. Here was something more than sympathy.

Here was a God-given certainty. She was not dreaming. She was not demented.

She was not psychologically off-beam. God was at work in her life. Here was confirmed certainty that God was indeed behind it all.

And so her song begins to flow like a river in spate. Mary magnified the Lord in her soul. My soul doth magnify the Lord.

That's the King James. And I want to keep it. The other translations use the word praise.

Well, it may mean the same thing. It doesn't really. Now I know the word magnify poses problems for literalists.

And if you're a literalist and you want to interpret the Bible literally at every point, that causes a little bit of a problem. How can you magnify the infinite? Come, come. How can you magnify the infinite? How can you make the incomprehensible God bigger and greater than He is? You can't do it.

And yet that's the thought behind the word that Mary used. My soul magnifies the Lord. What do you mean, Mary? Well, in my soul there is a song.

A song that is born out of what I have experienced of God's doings and of God's mercy and of God's grace. And as I tell it out and think about it and meditate upon it, it all shows a God that is too big for words. And my soul magnifies the Lord.

It makes the unseen, unknown God great in the sight of men that hear and understand. That's what a magnifying glass does, isn't it? You try it out. I remember when I was a boy in school, when the sun came out in our part of the world, very often we used to have a magnifying glass and make it focus on somebody's hand or somebody's knee or somebody's leg.

When they were not looking and bang, you know what happens, don't you? They begin to burn. Well, now how does that happen? Well, it happens in this way because all the rays of the sun were gathered there on one spot at one time. The sun was there all the time but there was no magnifying glass to bring the whole thing together.

The glory of God is there all the time but Mary brings all the rays together in declaring out the significance and the meaning and the relative facts of this one great act. And in so doing, her soul magnifies them. She makes Him who is unseen to be visible.

She makes Him who is a stranger to men to be discernible. And Mary rejoiced in God her Savior. These are her own words.

And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. This young woman from the village in the backwoods has found God as her Savior. Now, I know some very well-meaning people have tried to suggest that Mary didn't need a Savior, that Mary herself was a co-redemptrix with her son.

Now, that is not what the Bible says. And however well-meaning the thought and the expression, what Mary herself says in her song is this, I found God as my Savior. Things were pretty dead in Nazareth.

If you'd gone to the synagogue in Nazareth, I'm not so sure you'd have had a lot of light if you were seeking salvation. But Mary found God as her Savior. You see the balance of Scripture.

Or should I say the extremes of Scripture. All generations shall call me blessed. And that was true.

But nevertheless, it was not the blessedness of a sinless maiden, but of a maiden who was an ordinary sinner who had found the Savior. And whom God had chosen for this unique task in the outworking of redemption. Mary's spirit exalted in God as such.

The next thing I want you to notice, there were specific reasons for Mary's exaltation. She puts it like this. In the first place, God our Savior had looked upon her humble condition.

Now, I can only refer to this. And how to do it in a few words, I'm not so sure. But the notion is this.

Let me read it. He has been mindful of the humble state of his slave or handmaiden. But the thought of a slave comes in.

And the notion very simply is this. That God has looked upon her. That God has looked upon her.

You see, when a man is proud, when a woman is proud, he or she expects God to look her way or his way. And there may be some of us who came into this sanctuary this morning. And you know, we really expected God to look our way.

Look my way. Here I come. Oh God, have mercy on us.

That was not the attitude of this blessed Virgin Mary. The thing struck her she couldn't get away from it. That God had looked on her.

Looked on her. Looked her way. Never mind about what he did when he looked.

The mere fact that the almighty God of Abram and of Isaac and of Jacob and the God of the ages and of the centuries and of destiny had looked upon her, looked upon me. She sang because of that. Do you know anything of that sense of awe? Because God has looked upon you.

In the second place, God her Savior had done such great things for her that future generations would call her blessed. From now on, she says, all generations will call me blessed for the mighty one has done a great thing. What great things? Well, you were thinking of them last week.

I have no time to go back upon them, back to them now. But you see, Mary's talking generally. She didn't belong to our so-called culture.

I don't know what other word to use. Culture it isn't in the true sense. Folk who are the products of our culture talk brazenly about the most private affairs of life.

Mary wasn't brought up in that atmosphere. You see, Mary was a pure virgin. And as a pure virgin, she was reticent to talk about details.

So she speaks about it in general terms. The Lord has done great things. But those words, great things, include everything.

The angel coming, announcing that that holy thing that was to be born of her would be called the Son of God. That the Spirit of the Highest would overshadow her and look after her and protect her. All this comes in the orbit of the great things.

That's why she said, It is difficult for a brazen, uninhibited age such as ours to appreciate Mary's reserve. But there it is. Then Mary's exaltation of our Lord and our exaltation in his salvation comes to its climax with a note of worshipful adoration expressed in the words, Holy is his name.

I will have to close with this this morning. Holy is his name. What did she mean? Evidently, she used the word to indicate that God's name was separated from every other name, meaning that God was different from everybody and above everybody and exalted above everybody.

You know God like that. When you read of the gods of the heathen, when you read of the gods that have been made by man, gods that are the product of mental processes or gods of metal, as an Archbishop of Canterbury once put it, gods of metal or gods that are mental. When you think of these other gods, do you see the Lord God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to be absolutely separated? For that's what the word holy means.

Separated. There's a chasm that separates him from everybody, from all and sundry. He is alone.

Mary saw that. And you and I cannot worship God aright until we see him like that. But now, may I bring in something and I say it with no dogmatism at all.

When Mary said holy is his name, she may have had something else in her mind. I don't know. I raised the question.

Is she bringing out the contrast? Is she as it were answering a question that had been asked by some of the people, the gossip mongers in Nazareth? You see, some of them might have been said that she was an impure girl and had an impure and unholy relationship. And out of that unholy relationship, this babe in her womb had been conceived. Is she saying an answer to that? No, no, no, no.

The child in my womb is not born out of fornication. The child in my womb is not conceived by any unholy relationship, but by the Holy One. The One who's responsible for my condition is the Holy One of Israel in whom is no guile, in whom is no wrong, in whom is no deceit, in whom is no sin.

I have to end there. This young woman sees that God has been moving throughout the centuries in every generation and she sees behind it all the covenant that God gave to Abram and the promises that he's keeping in moving like this. What a blessed song, Mary's song.

Read it, my friend, and read it again and ponder it and pray over it and make it your own. And you know there is one sense in which all of us can make it our own. Mary's experience, of course, was wholly unique, unrepeatable, utterly, absolutely unrepeatable.

But there is a principle here which is repeatable. And it's what God delights to do. He takes somebody who is a nobody.

Whoever heard of Mary from Nazareth? Until God put His hand upon her and sent His angel to speak to her and caused His Holy Spirit to come upon her. Whoever heard of Mary of Nazareth? And no one ever would until God came to her and she said to Him, I'll be your handmaiden. I'll be your servant.

If you say that this is your will and if you say that I'm in your purpose and if you want to do this thing with me, though I don't understand it, I can't make sense out of it, I'm willing for you to do in me and through me whatever you want. And I'll tell you, my friend, if you want to count for God and if you want generations to come, and your own children to call you blessed, that's the place to start. And that's a principle that applies today.

You turn to the God of Mary and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus and the God of Abram and the God who rules throughout the generations and say this to Him, I'm a nobody. And I know that. But I'm willing to put my body and my mind and my will and my property and my home and my relationships and my business and my prospects and my everything and my character.

I'm willing to put it all at your disposal to do what you want to do with me and with it. And the God of Mary, the God of Mary will never let you down. Never.

Never. No. Never.

Let us pray. Our God and our Father, we thank you for the privilege of having this record in your holy word which stirs our souls and our spirits as we meditate upon it and makes us bow with humble awe at your feet. We thank you for what you did for this young woman and we pray, our God, that we may ever appreciate it.

Though we can never understand it fully in the sense of being able to explain cause and effect and so forth, we pray that we may recognize your hand as the author of the mighty deed and worship you on that account. But then, Father, we too have come from our Nazareth. Most of us are very ordinary people.

We cannot hope to leave any indelible mark upon history unless you take us into your hand as you took Peter and James and John and Andrew and the rest of them. Men, made of the same humble, sinful substance as we are, but you made them to be your servants as you made Mary your servant, make us too to the everlasting glory of your ever-blessed name. Amen.

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