

## Peace on Earth\_Mary, Did You Know?

My mom used to sing a song to us all the time when we were younger,

*"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,  
you make me happy, when skies are gray  
You'll never know dear how much I love you  
Please don't take my sunshine away"*

Sweet song when you're meaning it about a child you want to have around all the time. But the actual lyrics are super depressing. It's about some guy whose girlfriend or wife ran off with some other man and now he's pining after her all alone.

It's amazing the way music can affect our lives. Songs can get attached to memories and situations that give them emotional significance beyond the plain meaning of the words. Sometimes even hearing the opening notes of a song can cause comfort or distress.

Our text this morning is a song. Mary's song. It's often called the Magnificat - for the first word in the latin translation. It's the song that Mary sings when she goes to visit her relative Elizabeth and Elizabeth confirms everything Gabriel said to Mary. But as we'll see, there's more to the song than that.

Overcome with joy at Elizabeth's encouragement, Mary sings the following, starting in verse 46:

**Luke 1:**<sup>46</sup> "My soul glorifies the Lord  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my sw-! Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors."

<sup>56</sup> Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

**May God bless the reading of His word. Amen.**

Nothing bothers me more than when someone looks down on another based on their income or class. I didn't grow up poor by any means, but living in Southern WV I saw my share of poverty. It was really surprising to me when I went to college and started hanging out with folks whose families had obviously made quite a bit more money than I was used to.

I still have a vivid memory of serving with a mission trip in college and listening to a team member talk about how awful she felt about the living conditions of this family we were doing some home repairs for. I remember thinking that I had friends who'd lived in much worse and we never really thought it was a big deal. Most people would much rather be given dignity than charity.

But we often confuse the Gospel of Jesus with the Gospel of the American dream. We'd much rather give handouts to make us feel better about how much we have than to give up what we don't need and treat others like people.

I'm getting a little off topic though. I share this because I was particularly bothered this week studying our text when I came across one commentator who insisted that Mary could not have actually composed this beautiful song. The poetry is so beautiful, this commentator, suggested, that it couldn't have possibly be written by a poor, common girl from Nazareth. Surely it was written by some more learned believers at a later date and superimposed upon this story in Luke's composition.

Obviously this scholar forgot that most good music is written in hard times. The blues was invented by slaves and sharecroppers. Some of the best folk and country tunes were written by folks with little to no education.

Mary may not have been well-to-do, but she knew her bible well enough. She would have grown up hearing about Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Mothers would have gathered around the children to share stories of the great faith of those who came before them.

Mary probably would know well the story of Hannah - the barren wife of Elkanah who so desperately wanted a son that she promised God to give him over to serve the Lord if only he'd hear her prayer. God answered and the prophet Samuel was born. When Samuel had been weaned, Hannah brought him up to the tabernacle at a place called Shiloh to be raised by Eli the priest. And there she sang a song - very similar to the song we just heard from Mary.

Hannah sang in thankfulness for God's provision. She sang about his victory over the proud and arrogant, about the reversal of fortunes for the rich and poor, and about God's favor for the downtrodden.

In this miraculous pregnancy, God was providing Hannah with honor instead of shame, favor and dignity instead of the laughter and pity she'd received from others.

It would not be strange at all for Mary to have this song stuck in her head as she travelled to see Elizabeth. She's a poor girl belonging to a poor people. Gabriel's news of her miraculous pregnancy could mean shame for her and her family, because few would believe it was true. BUT it BEING true meant that God was doing something unimaginably good for her and her people.

Maybe she composed that song on the spot after Elizabeth's encouraging response. But I think it's more likely that she'd been thinking about Hannah's song on the whole journey and began writing her own tune. John leaping for joy in the womb and Elizabeth's rejoicing just provided the right opportunity for Mary to share it.

You might be wondering why any of that matters. Some of it doesn't. The exact details of how Mary wrote the song is just speculation. But knowing the context can help us to understand the meaning of a work of art. And this song has some recurring themes that are worth explore more in depth.

In particular, I want us to look at Mary's focus upon God's Salvation, Mercy, and Favor.

#### I. PEACE GIVES UP CONTROL (1:47-49).

**First, Salvation.** Mary bursts into song because she is excited about the promise of salvation from the son she will raise. She links the great things that God is doing for her NOW to the great things that God has done for her people in the past. God is the one who keeps promises and brings His people out of trouble and hardship. God is faithful even when His people aren't.

Salvation from God isn't earned, but it costs dearly. Mary rejoices because God has looked upon her in her humility, but her song also implies the cost of obedience. She is fully aware that having this child is going to mean hardship in her relationship with her family - in this time and culture, getting pregnant out of wedlock could even warrant death because of the shame she was bringing on her fiance and family. **But she trusts in God's provision and is willing to obey.**

I heard a story recently from pastor and author Tim Keller. He'd been talking with a lady who was new to faith and trying to understand exactly how this salvation thing worked.

All growing up, she'd only ever heard that we were saved through righteousness - by being a good person - and now here Keller was telling her that she can be saved solely by grace through faith. She asked why people don't talk about this more.

He was tempted to launch into a long answer as pastors do, but instead he asked - what do you think? Her answer surprised him.

She said, "If you're saved by works, then there is a limit to what God can ask of you. You're like a taxpayer - you pay your dues and there's a limit to what can be reasonably asked - He can't ask for just anything. But if I'm REALLY saved by the free gift of grace, then there's no limit to what He could ask of me. My obedience has to be unconditional just as His grace is."

Most people hear that salvation is by grace and faith alone and think, “Well, this is great, I can do whatever I want.” But the truth is that it means you are not your own. You’re bought with a price.

Mary understood this even then. The gift that God was bringing in this salvation was unmerited and undeserved, but receiving it meant totally surrendering her life.

## **PEACE BROUGHT ABOUT BY SALVATION GIVES UP CONTROL OVER LIFE.**

**It was worth it. More than worth it, it was worth singing about.**

### **II. PEACE GIVES UP CELEBRITY (1:50).**

**Next, we see Mercy.** She views God’s salvation and favor all through the lens of divine loving-kindness and compassion.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.

Mary has become one of the most venerated biblical characters apart from Jesus. To the point where our Catholic brothers and sisters even pray to Mary asking for intercession on their behalf - much like we might ask a friend that we admire for their spiritual maturity to pray for us in times of need.

But Mary did not see herself that way. She definitely did not see herself as being particularly worthy in terms of her lineage or class - that would have been nonsensical. But she also didn’t seem to view herself as particularly virtuous and thus worthy of this honor. Instead, she exemplified true humility and meekness in that she didn’t much think of herself at all.

When she says that God was mindful of her humble state, she’s talking about God’s surprising goodness in noticing her when she wasn’t expecting it, not her own reward for being humble enough.

One of my favorite authors, C.S. Lewis, puts it this way:

“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him.

If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

**That's the kind of humility Mary shows.** She didn't think less of herself, she just thought of herself less. She was so caught up in God's mercy that she didn't have time to think about herself.

Lewis goes on to write:

"If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed."

Mary knew that all generations would call her blessed - but it wasn't because of her character - it was because of God's goodness to her.

The peace of God does not crave attention or fame, but exalts in the purposes of God being fulfilled - regardless of who fulfills it.

### **PEACE BORN THROUGH MERCY GIVES UP CELEBRITY.**

Mary understood what every parent learns sooner or later: She's not the main character of her story.

### **III. PEACE GIVES UP COMFORT (1:51-55).**

**Finally, this song speaks of Favor.** Mary's not talking about favor specific to herself - that's a bit antithetical to the humility we just discussed. Mary speaks about the favor that God grants to the poor and broken.

It is impossible to get through this song without noticing the clear contrast between the rich and poor, the powerful and the weak. The humble and hungry and lifted up and filled. The proud and powerful are struck down and sent away empty-handed.

Now, it's not as if Mary is some revolutionary stirring up a rebellion in her village. This language can almost sound like some socialist or communist propaganda to redistribute wealth and promote class warfare. But she wasn't trying to stir up a revolt. She was appealing to common hope and language for the Jewish people.

In Deuteronomic law, God had created systems to keep those at the lowest rungs of society from being crushed under the weight of poverty. It was assumed that life would happen to people. Folks can fall on hard times for any number of reasons -

- there's a drought or famine and crops don't come through that year;
- health issues or injuries prevent a person from working;
- a family member gets into trouble and you go into debt bailing them out.

**But woven into the fabric of Israel's life was the opportunity for debts to be forgiven and people to receive a clean slate. This was called the year of Jubilee.** Land and resources that had been sold off to cover debts could be reclaimed and debts were forgiven. This was God's way of reminding people that everything is a gift from God, and no person lacks significance or worth to Him.

Later, when the prophets are critiquing Israel before they are sent off to exile at the hands of the Babylonians - one of the chief sins levelled against Israel is its exploitation of the poor and vulnerable in their midst. **They've forgotten to take care of the poor, the orphan, and the widows, and so God promises to level the playing field - to take down rulers and exalt the lowly.**

This was a common hope and language for Jewish people. You can see it throughout the Gospels in their disdain for Herod and tax collectors. But it's not about taking money away from the rich to give to the poor. It's about reminding those with resources that worth and dignity have nothing to do with those resources.

How many times have you heard someone come back from a mission trip and say, "they blessed us so much more than we could have blessed them." You go thinking you're going to do some great work with all your resources, only to find that God's spirit is living and active there in vibrant and profound ways. **You walk away from folks who have nothing wishing that you had what they had.**

A guy named Shane Claiborne - leader of a Christian community in Philadelphia called the Simple Way - has said that the problem with many churches is not a lack of charity. We have plenty of good Christians who want to do good for others. The problem is just that many Christians don't know the poor. If we did, then their problems would become our problems cause they'd be like family.

Mary understood that God is always on the side of the poor and lowly. After all, God chose her.

Receiving the gift of God's favor means giving up the pursuit of wealth and worldly comfort for the joy of God's provision.

## **PEACE IN GOD'S FAVOR GIVES UP WORLDLY COMFORT**

### CONCLUSION

As Mary meditated on SALVATION, MERCY, AND FAVOR from God, these words just spilled out of her. But I wonder if she appreciated her own lyrics in different ways throughout the years. It's interesting thinking about how we got this song here in the text. I presume that Luke got it from Mary herself. She would have had to treasure the song in her heart all those years before she shared it with him.

Having written a few songs of my own, I know firsthand how your own lyrics can take on new shape and life as you move through different seasons.

- It was one thing for her to sing it early on in her pregnancy, but I wonder her lyrics echoed in her mind as angels sang choruses and shepherds and foreign kings alike showed up to bring gifts to Jesus in a stable.
- I wonder how she felt about God's mercy and favor when Jesus had crowds following him, and it was sometimes difficult for her to get in to see him.
- I wonder if she ever doubted in that promise of salvation when her son was ridiculed, spat upon, and hung on a cross to die looking like a liar and a criminal.
- I wonder how her song changed in her own eyes when he rose again.

Reminds me of another tune by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene - "Mary Did You Know?"

Mary did you know  
That your baby boy  
Would one day walk on water  
...did you know...your baby boy  
Would save our sons and daughters  
Did you know  
That your baby boy  
Has come to make you new  
This Child that you delivered  
Will soon deliver you

Mary did you know [that he'd] give sight to the blind man  
[that he'd] calm a storm with His hand  
Did you know  
That your baby boy  
Has walked where angels trod  
And when you kiss your little baby  
You've kissed the face of God

Oh Mary did you know  
That your baby boy  
Is Lord of all creation, [that he'll] one day rule the nations  
Did you know [your boy] Is heaven's perfect Lamb  
And the sleeping Child you're holding  
Is the great I Am

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**Mary knew, but she couldn't have known fully.**

I wonder how often we fail to grasp completely just how deep our Savior's love is for us. Just how good the peace is that He offers.

I hope today that we can have the courage to give up our lives so that we might receive that peace in full.

May we give up control, may we lay down our search for celebrity, and may we surrender our desire for comfort.

May we lay it all down to receive the peace of Christ, come to save and restore in ways we can't imagine.

Would you pray with me?