

The Canticles of Christmas: Magnificat

The young virgin, Mary, is living in a difficult era of Israel's history: the Romans were violently oppressing their Jewish subjects, even crucifying many of those who had chosen to rebel against the Empire. Additionally, Mary was pregnant without a husband in the first century, in which such a situation brought tremendous shame for the rest of one's life. Luke shows, however, that in the midst of these trying and dangerous circumstances, Mary found cause to rejoice.

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
 For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 50 And his mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 51 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
 52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
 and exalted those of humble estate;
 53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent away empty.
 54 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 55 as he spoke to our fathers,
 to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

We notice from Mary's life two important things:

I. **Believers become singers (vv. 46-47)**

Notice in these verses that Mary became the singer, not because she had a great alto or soprano voice, not because she was assigned a role in a choir, but rather because her soul and spirit were alive with love for God. In the midst of her circumstances, she rejoices, because she “believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (v. 45). This is true throughout the Scriptures. We see that Moses rejoices in song, as does Miriam, after the Lord delivers them from the Egyptian armies. Similarly, David continually rejoices in the Lord's triumph over His and our enemies. When we come to the New Testament epistles, we find that Paul instructs us to be filled with the Spirit, and the first sign of the Spirit's power and presence in our lives is that we make melody in our hearts to the Lord. When we come to the end of the New Testament, we find that heaven and our future glory is full of singing. Clearly, every believer is transformed into a chorister, because of what the Lord has done.

II. **The believer's song is about the Savior's mercy (vv. 48-55)**

Notice that Mary is not focused upon herself. Her joy is not emanating from her own self-esteem. She is rejoicing because of the Lord's mercy, first to her, and then to all His people.

a. The believer sings because of the Savior's mercy to him (vv. 48-49)

Notice that Mary recognizes her need: she calls God “my Savior,” she describes her estate as “humble,” and she labels herself as “his servant.” The descriptions of Mary in medieval and

later Roman Catholic Maryology are quite contrary to the simple picture described for us here of a young maiden who needed a Savior and who knew of her humble estate. She rejoiced because God had chosen her, an unworthy peasant, to bear the Savior in her womb. We, of course, have Jesus dwelling in our hearts, which gives even more reason for us to rejoice and to magnify the Lord.

b. The believer sings about the Savior's mercy to His people (vv. 50-55)

Mary has obviously been contemplating the Scriptures on her way to visit Elizabeth in Judea. She clearly recounts the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and many other places in the Scriptures. She recounts to whom the Lord shows His mercy, how He shows His mercy to them, and why He shows His mercy to them.

1. The Lord shows mercy to those who fear Him (v. 50)

We are tempted to fear many things and many people, but the Lord teaches us to fear Him alone and all other fears will dissipate.

2. He shows His mercy by demonstrating strength for His people (vv. 51-53)

Mary remembers that Moses and the children of Israel were saved "with an outstretched arm" of God. He scatters the proud and He exalts those of humble estate.

3. God shows His mercy because He keeps His promise to Abraham (vv. 54-55)

Mary has also been contemplating the great promises to Abraham which are fully brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In Galatians 3, Paul explains that we, by faith in Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, become the children of God. This happens because God is a great promise keeper, which brings continual joy to all of His servants.

Discussion Questions

1. What was going on in and around Mary's life that might have caused her to despair? Why did she rejoice instead?

2. Why do we often see in the Bible the singing of songs as in Exodus 15, 1 Chronicles 16, Psalm 92, and Revelation 19?

3. What were the specific reasons for Mary's joyful praise?

4. How does the description of Mary in Luke 1:47-48 differ from some popular views of her?

5. Why does the believer find comfort in the "great reversal" of human fortunes described in Luke 1:51-53?

6. What are the promises to Abraham (alluded to in verse 55) which the birth of Jesus fulfills?

Going Deeper

1. What have you learned from the Magnificat that changes your perspective today?
2. What would it mean for you personally to grow in the fear of the Lord?