

THE PRAISE OF MARY

Series: To Make Ready a People Prepared for the Lord

by Doug Goins

The narratives in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel present a variety of voices breaking into new expressions of musical praise and worship following the 400 years of silence between the Old and New Testaments. Luke, the artistically sensitive Greek, the doctor-scientist, is the only gospel author to set down in writing the songs of Gabriel, Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth. These songs are in marked contrast to the contemporary Jewish religious songs of lament of that day, the mournful songs of a people in spiritual exile. They reveal that when Jesus came into the world, music was reborn .

The first two stories tell of God's preparing Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary with his revealed word through the angel Gabriel. Today we will consider the responses of Elizabeth and Mary (in Luke 1:39-56), while next week we will look at Zechariah's response. All three of these people respond to God's truth in songs of worship and adoration. In their hymns of praise there is an exuberance, a spontaneity, a freedom in worship that comes not from human planning or organizing, but from hearts overflowing with God's love, with the reality of his presence and the intimacy of his fellowship.

While preparing for this message, I spent some time thinking on the relative lack of spontaneity we experience compared with the over-supply of contrived preparation on all sides during the Christmas period. I was struck by a droll remark made by Garrison Keillor in a recent magazine interview. For the past 11 years, Keillor has been the writer and host of the Minnesota Public Radio program, 'A Prairie Home Companion,' broadcast live from St. Paul, Minnesota, every Saturday night. Each week Keillor spins off a monologue about 'Lake Wobegon,' a mythical Midwest town.

In the interview, Keillor was asked were there any Christmas customs celebrated in Lake Wobegon that should be adopted elsewhere. He replied, 'The custom of postponement, I think, is one that everyone can benefit from.' The interviewer asked, 'What's that?' Keillor said, 'Well, retailers want Christmas to begin somewhere in October, but that would be the death of it. I think that what people can do to preserve Christmas is not to do anything about it until the last minute. I think it should be a small, last-minute feast day. It should be celebrated with some spontaneity, not like the invasion of a small foreign country.' He understands our culture, doesn't he? Too often God's people get sucked into massive preparation to celebrate what should be a spontaneous event.

Our narrative today concerns the personal relationship between two women, between the elderly pregnant woman, Elizabeth, and her young teenage cousin, Mary. It suggests Luke's special concern and sensitivity toward women. Elizabeth is now in her sixth miraculous month of pregnancy, carrying the baby John, the forerunner of Messiah. She meets her cousin Mary, who is carrying her own miraculously conceived baby Jesus, 'Jehovah is salvation.'

Luke 1:39-41:

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Mary immediately responds to Gabriel's annunciation and its miraculous aftermath. Her desire is to be with her cousin. She senses a need for support, for encouragement, perhaps even confirmation of Gabriel's word about Elizabeth. Above all, she feels the need to be with someone who had also, in a similar way, been miraculously blessed. I doubt if Joseph would yet know about the pregnancy. Probably no one in Nazareth would have her confidence so soon after the annunciation and her conception. Following preparations for travel and a four-day

journey south, she comes to a city in a hilly region of Judea, south of Jerusalem.

Mary's arrival in Zechariah and Elizabeth's home seems to have been unexpected. The verses suggest that she goes inside to find her cousin. She initiates the greeting, perhaps catching Elizabeth by surprise. But as Mary comes face-to-face with her cousin and begins to offer these words of greeting, two wonderful things happen to Elizabeth. First, her six-month-old unborn baby boy gives an extra hard kick,

perhaps a surge or leap, in her womb. Having been a father four times, I remember the joy of feeling the baby kicking inside my wife's tummy. I have watched the look of delight on our children's faces as they felt their baby brother or sister kicking inside mommy's tummy. But the kick that is recorded here, in response to Mary's greeting to Elizabeth, was the kind that probably jolted Elizabeth halfway across the room.

Secondly, we are told, Elizabeth was 'filled with the Holy Spirit.' She was given by God an illumination, an understanding of the unseen spiritual realities involved in this encounter.

She responds with an exclamation of praise, a shout of joy. Verses 42-45:

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 me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed for there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.'

Thrilled by this magnificent, unexpected revelation, Elizabeth bursts into song. In our Bibles her words are printed in prose, but actually they form a poem or improvisational song. Twice Elizabeth acknowledges God's blessing (verse 42), first on Mary, and then on the baby Jesus: 'Blessed are you among women,' and, 'Blessed is the fruit of your womb.' This is the word in Greek from which we get our English word 'eulogy.' It is the same word for 'blessed' that some early manuscripts quote the angel Gabriel as using in greeting Mary during her annunciation. In verse 28 we read that the angel said to Mary, 'Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' To these words, some manuscripts add, 'Blessed are you among women.' What Elizabeth is saying to her young cousin is that Mary and her unborn son are honored of God and they deserve to be eulogized, praised by all humanity. Elizabeth is overwhelmed that she and her unborn son should be privileged to encounter the mother of the promised Redeemer, the One whom she identifies in verse 43 as 'My Lord.' That title for this baby is the same title David gives the promised Messiah in Psalm 110:1-4:

The Lord says to my Lord [The Lord God in heaven says to my Lord, the One who is to come], 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.' The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day you lead your host upon the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning like dew your youth will come to you. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."

The promise was that people would offer themselves to this One, and that is exactly what Elizabeth is doing here. Implicit in her acknowledgment of Mary's Messiah Baby is a declaration of her own submission to his rule, and loyalty to his mother. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the passage tells us, she explains to Mary that her baby 'jumped for joy' when he sensed the presence of his God-Man cousin.

With all the discussion today about when conscious life begins in the womb, this is an amazing testimony to the reality of that conscious life in the fetus. Here is testimony that a six-month-old unborn baby senses the presence of the Lord Jesus in the womb of his mother Mary.

In the final stanza of this song of praise, Elizabeth wholeheartedly acknowledges that a much greater honor has been conferred on Mary than on her. Verse 45: 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.' While Mary is honored for her obedience, the hymn of Elizabeth is

in praise of the One who is coming in fulfillment of God's word.

There is a wonderful dynamic at work between these two women. I am impressed by Elizabeth's attitude toward her young cousin. She chooses to voluntarily place herself in the background, joyfully acknowledging the greater honor that Mary had been given. Elizabeth received her own gift of a son with grateful worship to the Lord, saying, 'God has seen my barrenness and has taken it away.' But when she meets Mary, to whom a much greater gift has been given, she does not become jealous. She makes a choice to humble herself, and sings loudly, delightedly, to the honor of Mary. What if she had allowed pride, jealousy, or competition to enter? How it would have spoiled the relationship God was building between them! Elizabeth models beautifully for us Peter's word, 'Clothe yourselves all of you with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God that in due time he may exalt you.' Because of Elizabeth's humble choice of submission to her young cousin, for 2,000 years, because of what God recorded in his word through Luke, Elizabeth has been exalted. God is true to his word .

In verses 46 through 55 we have Mary's own hymn of praise and adoration. More than any other, perhaps, this passage of scripture has been set to music down through the history of the church.

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.

This beautiful song of praise, in four stanzas, is called the Magnificat, which is the first word of the hymn in Jerome's fourth century Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible. In the opening stanza, Mary summarizes God's grace at work in her life and her own experience of joy and worship because of her personal relationship with God. She sings, 'My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.'

When Elizabeth began her song, we read, 'She exclaimed with a loud voice' she sang at the top of her lungs. But Mary begins quietly, introspectively. Hers is a hymn of praise that grows gradually in volume and intensity. The crescendo will grow out of her own experience, her actual impressions. She has traveled four days, probably alone, to reach the home of her cousin. She has had four days to meditate, to review Old Testament Messianic hope; four days to pray, perhaps to sing to herself the scriptural songs of her childhood; four days of communion with her Lord; four days of preparation for this spontaneous expression of devotion and adoration.

Mary sings this hymn because God had favored, or graced, her character of humility, her lifestyle of purity. She sings because of the joy she experienced in the annunciation and her conception. She sings because of her selfless surrender to her Savior God to be used as he willed. Now she says her entire being magnifies, worships, exalts and adores the Lord. This whole sequence of unimaginable events evokes in her worshipful

gratitude, humble praise, joy growing out of humility .

A second stanza, beginning at the end of verse 48, grows louder as she sings of God's grace at work. From her own experience, she moves to celebrate the cause of these impressions, 'For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.' As a result of God's act of grace in her life, in retrospect of this miraculous intervention, this God of might, this God of holiness, the fact that his mercy has been shown toward her, a humble Gaililean teenager, every generation, down to our own, will call her blessed.

Mary uses a different word than the one used three times previously. It is the same word used by Elizabeth in her last statement in verse 45, 'Blessed is she who believed.' It literally means, 'fortunate is this one.' This is the same word Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount to define a spiritual quality of life. To be blessed of God is to be profoundly spiritually satisfied with life.

Elizabeth was making a judgment about Mary. Two thousand years of human history make the same judgment, and we do it this morning as we gather in response to these words. We are saying that Mary's spiritual quality of life declares what God thinks about her. To be blessed does not necessarily mean to be subjectively happy. Mary would face many struggles as Jesus grew into manhood. Luke describes her pondering over his adult life and ministry. She would have to watch her own Son suffer and die on a cruel cross.

Blessedness does not mean absence of pain or difficulties. Blessedness comes as a result of the spiritual satisfaction with life that only God can give. Mary's own experience with God, and its resultant blessing, enabled her to see that he is the One to be honored, for it is his mighty deeds, his creative power, his holiness, his perfection, not hers; it is his mercy toward her and all who reverence and respect him. for who he is. That is what brings blessedness in life.

The psalmist has written, 'Blessed is the man that fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments! His descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed' (Psalm 112:1, 2). Do you want to experience blessedness as it is described here? Then live your life in submission and obedience to God's word. Understand what it means to live righteously in your community .

In the third stanza, verses 51-53, Mary is going to develop the historical consequences of God's nature his holiness, his might, his mercy describing his mighty acts of grace, past, present, and future: 'He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.' Her hymn swells with animation as she sings of a coming Messianic revolution, a revolution that has already begun in God's choice of her and Elizabeth, two insignificant daughters of Israel.

Their selection helps illustrate God's reversal of human ideas about greatness and smallness, significance and insignificance. The tenses of the six verbs in these verses suggest an openendedness as to the accomplishment of God's mighty act of salvation. In the past, Mary is recalling God's historical involvement with the true Israel, the faithful remnant. In the present, she sees the dawning of the age of Messiah, when God's righteous kingdom will continue to impact all of human history through Jesus. Looking ahead, she anticipates prophetically the final consummation, when perfect redemption will be accomplished. What Mary is saying in these three verses is that God accomplishes a complete reversal of human values. It is not the spiritually proud, the socially mighty, nor the materially prosperous who have the last word. Through Messiah, God will scatter, put down and send away the prosperous and the powerful. Isaiah foretold this ministry of judgment by the Messiah (Isa. 5). Here Mary is saying that arrogance, power and wealth do not matter in God's kingdom. This merciful God will exalt and fill with good things all who fear him, those of low degree, the hungry the spiritually bankrupt. How wonderfully these verses correspond to the first four beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Mary sings of a God who is not bound by how men think or what men do, a God who overthrows society's attitudes and prejudices.

The fourth stanza is a diminuendo, a gentle, thoughtful benediction. Mary sings of God's grace to Israel

specifically, in the promise made to Abraham, and through the coming Messiah. Verses 54, 55. 'He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.' She becomes reflective in recalling God's faithfulness to his chosen people Israel; and she suggests that everything about which she has sung to this point is the outcome of the fact that God is true to his promises of salvation through a coming Redeemer, a promise made centuries earlier to Abraham and all of his spiritual descendants.

God's action that is beginning now in Messiah is not so much completely new as a continuation of his mercy to Abraham. It promises that the people of Israel will be transformed into a glorified Messianic nation, a holy nation which we today are privileged to be a part in Jesus Christ. It was that certainty that prompted the apostle Peter to sing his own hymn of praise, in I Peter 2:9: 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.'

Mary's wonderful hymn of praise, so richly informed by Old Testament history and hope, offers some very helpful insights into the true nature of worship. All of us struggle at times with both our individual and with our corporate worship life. Our personal times of worship can be dry and dusty. Corporately, we wish for more varied experiences of worship. We 'church hop,' seeking a worship experience that will somehow feel right. Mary's life, and her response of worship in this Magnificat, show the important correspondence between the inner life of the spirit and the outward expression of worship.

Along these lines, four things struck me in this passage. First, Mary's worship grew out of submission to the Lord and obedience to his word. Remember what she said following the annunciation (verse 38), 'I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.' We will always struggle in worship as long as we permit areas of disobedience in life, willful choices to not surrender to what God has clearly revealed to us.

Secondly, Mary's hymn, her verbal expression of adoration, came out of a soul which magnified, a spirit which rejoiced in her Lord God. Mary did not sing in order to experience worship. Her hymn was an overflow of a life of worship, a communion of intimacy with the Lord. Far too often we try to have worship through experience. We feel that if we sing the right songs, if our body language is right, if we are led by the 'right' leadership style, then we can worship. But we miss the point. Worship comes out of a life that is rightly related to the Lord.

Thirdly, Mary's act of worship was a spontaneous expression of joy, exaltation and freedom. It was a wonderful release of honest emotion, but her feelings were controlled by and grounded in God's written revelation. In Mary's hymn there are at least ten references from the Old Testament. There is a wonderful balance between the subjective and the objective, the emotional and the rational. Her feelings and her mind were fully informed by the very heart and mind of God as he expressed it through his word. This balance is a very necessary part of our worship experience.

Finally, Mary's own experience of worship was stabilized by her clear sense of her own identity. She knew her place in God's plan and purposes. She calls herself 'God's handmaiden.' She knows that she is part of his sweeping plan of redemption for mankind. She has the biggest possible picture of who God is, what he is doing in the world, and how he is going to use her.

As I studied Mary's life and hymn, I was reminded of an experience I had in the summer of 1964. As a college student then, I spent a summer in Colombia, South America, teaching conversational English in a seminary. A young man who was studying to be a pastor invited me to spend a weekend with him, visiting a small village church that he pastored on weekends. Following a five-hour bus ride along muddy jungle roads, we arrived at the coffee-producing village where he had his flock of 20 believers.

The home of a village woman, Dona Maria, served as their meeting place. The worship left much to be desired. The singing was abysmal. The pastor was just learning to preach. It poured rain the whole time and the roof leaked terribly. The people were covered in mud from slogging through the dirt roads to go to church. But the prayer time was inspiring, especially the prayer of Dona Maria. This woman had been a widow for 20 years, and her six children had all died in early childhood. She supported herself by doing laundry and

sewing. She had given the two front rooms of her home over to the congregation for their services and had herself moved into the two remaining rooms.

As she prayed, great tears streaming down her face, her words spoke gratitude for the richness of her life. She thanked God for the people gathered, and it was clear she was intimately involved in what God was doing among them. She thanked him for the privilege of having them in her home and the richness of the time they were enjoying together. Her prayer was rich in biblical language. It was clear from Dona Maria's prayer that she, like Mary, was a woman of the scriptures. That was what controlled her thinking. The part of her prayer that finally moved me to tears was when she began to pray for me as an honored guest from North America. She prayed for the church in America, a church that she looked on as far superior to her own, one that was blessed with many things from God, a church that was full of mature, godly people. After the service she asked me if I would ask my friends in America to pray for her, for her weak faith.

I learned. an important lesson about the true nature of worship on that day 21 years ago. I have now met two Marys, one in the scriptures and one in my own experience, both of whom understood that worship comes from inside. It does not depend on external circumstances. At times I feel guilty being in a church like ours. We are so richly blessed in teaching, music, fellowship, etc., yet we can become so critical, so demanding and picky about our worship experience and how our personal needs for worship should be met. My prayer for us as God's people is that we will understand the truth of this word. God creates worship inside of us which flows out when we are alone or gathered with others in his presence, regardless of external circumstances.

Verse 56 says that Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home. (When I studied this passage with a number of young couples, one very pregnant wife suggested that Mary probably remained there three months because her morning sickness prevented her leaving earlier.) In any event, what a beautiful picture we have here of the two women spending three months in the quietness of the Judean village. Mary, the teenage mother-to-be, and Elizabeth, the senior citizen mother-to-be, walking together with the Lord, the older woman sharing with her cousin the wisdom of her years. Luke implies that Mary remained until Elizabeth gave birth to John. That would have been the loving thing to do.

We have no record of the final six months of Mary's pregnancy, but we can be sure that she lived them out in fellowship with the God of her fathers, a fellowship more wonderful than any she had ever known before. And we can be sure that Joseph, prepared by the angel Gabriel, guarded her from all the malicious cruelty of the town and its idle gossip .

Mary and Joseph were given six months together to prepare for the life-changing impact that the baby Jesus would have on their relationship; preparation for the beautiful Christmas event which would unfold on their government-mandated census trip to Bethlehem.

May our own period of preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus enjoy the same qualities of friendship and the same depth of worship which God allowed Elizabeth and Mary.

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