

Magnifying God

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Preacher: John Ross

[0 : 00] So let's turn back to Luke chapter one, verses that we read a little earlier, and we think about magnifying God. This is a very remarkable song from a very remarkable young woman.

And it's important to note that Luke, wanting us to see the power of God at work, stresses Mary's youth. And he does this by a contrast with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was childless and we read she was advanced in years. Mary, on the other hand, was a young virgin. And what God did miraculously at one end of the age spectrum, he does now even more marvelously at the other end.

We're not told how young Mary was. But from what we know of Jewish marriage customs at the time, it's highly unlikely that she would be on her mid-teens. But fascinating as all this is, Luke's emphasis is not on Mary.

And Mary's emphasis is not on herself. It is very much on God. Which is precisely where we ought to place the emphasis.

[1 : 15] And indeed, that is where the church, down through the ages, has put the emphasis. Though at times, Mary has been allowed to eclipse both her son and his father.

Now this song, Mary's song, is known as the Magnificat, or as we might render it, the magnifying of God. Let's notice three things magnificent that it says about him.

First of all, it tells us that God is mindful. He remembers us. And that thought triggered off Psalm 115 in my mind, which we've just sung.

The Lord remembers Israel, and he will bless us all. The Lord is mindful. He remembers us. And we can see that in verse 48, which Mary says, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. And then again, in verse 54 there, he says, he has helped his servant, in this case, not Mary, but Israel, in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke, or as he promised, to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

[2 : 34] The few faithful Israelites that lived at the time of Jesus' birth may well have reached the conclusion that God had forgotten them. For 400 years, his voice had been silent.

Not since Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had a prophet's voice been heard in Israel. It was a tragic time for the Jewish people. They had lost their kings.

Their prophets had fallen silent. And although they still had their priests, they'd lost their independence. Their temple had been desecrated. Their law sidelined.

And their heritage despised. I imagine for godly people, they would have thought that the words of Asaph in Psalm 77 had a very special resonance for them.

Asaph asks a number of questions without, at this point, posing an answer. Has the Lord rejected me forever?

[3 : 31] Will he never again be kind to me? Is his unfailing love gone forever? Have his promises permanently failed? Has God forgotten to be gracious?

And as one version puts it, has he slammed the door on his compassion? And if they felt that Asaph's sentiments were appropriate for them in their day, surely they are appropriate for us today in Scotland.

It surely isn't difficult to compile evidence that would seem to back up the argument that God has abandoned Scotland.

For example, the 20th century was the only century since the Reformation without a national awakening or a revival in Scotland.

Isolated ones, yes. But national, no. In our own generation, in the last few years particularly, we've seen the collapse of public Christianity.

[4 : 36] We know that most Scots have rejected Bible-based morality. And whatever might be true legally and constitutionally, with less than 7% going to church when that was possible, we cannot say that Scotland is any longer a Christian nation.

And somehow, somewhere, COVID-19 fits into this picture, though I'm not quite sure where. It wouldn't be difficult to conclude that God had abandoned Scotland.

And imagine you were one of those who lived in Mary's day. And imagine that was your mood if you were Mary and her family circle.

And then suddenly, out of the blue, when many despaired of God ever again breaking through the darkness, comes the visit of Gabriel and his strange greeting to young Mary.

Greetings, favoured one. The Lord is with you. For you have found favour with God. Little wonder, in verse 29, Mary, we read, was greatly troubled at the same and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

[5 : 54] Or, as we might say, tried to understand what he was getting at. It was absolutely breathtaking to realise that despite all of your fears, God had not forgotten you.

That he knew all about you and that he actually had you in mind. And not only you as an individual, but your people too. After 400 years, God broke the silence to complete what he had started over two millennia previously.

Back then, he had promised that through Abraham's descendant, singular, not descendants, descendant, that all peoples on earth would be blessed. You can read about that in Genesis 12 and verse 3.

But which descendant was it? And there are plenty to choose from. If you turn over the page to Luke's genealogy in chapter 3, we have a number of possible candidates.

Was it Isaac? Was it Jacob? Judah? Perez? Hezron? Ram? Aminadab? Nashon? Salmon? Boaz? Obed? Jesse?

[7 : 09] Or his son? Great David, the king? No, it was none of them. The line continued beyond David for another 14 generations to the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And it was none of that line of generations either. And after that, the line continued for a further 13 unbroken generations.

And Abraham's descendant was found in none of those. And so the line went on right down to the father of Joseph, who became the husband of Mary.

And then the line is completed. Until then, no one had been born with the capability of blessing all nations.

But the line, of course, was not at an end. There was a final generation. And so we read of Joseph, the son of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

[8 : 11] What was it that Gabriel had said to Mary? You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, the Savior, the Messiah.

We can imagine it like this. You're living in the central belt. Because of some industrial catastrophe, every river and stream, every lock and burn, every reservoir has been polluted for generations.

No fresh water can be found. And as a result, the population is dying out of thirst and dirt and disease. But then you learn that someone a very long time ago had begun building a pipeline to bring cool, clean, safe water down from the highlands.

Let's say from Loch Ness. To refresh and revive the dying population all around. Now everything was in place for the great benefactor to complete the last meter of the pipeline and turn on the tap.

And so God, through 41 generations of Abraham's descendants, had constructed a channel for his grace. When we come to Mary, God completes the pipeline and turns on the tap of the water of life to cleanse, refresh and renew a needy world.

[9 : 33] Despite the long passage of time, God had not for one second forgotten his promises. His silence did not.

And in our case, it does not mean that he has failed to be faithful or that he has slammed the door on his compassion. No, through all the dark and dry ages that passed before Mary's day, he had worked on his plans in the silence of the centuries and fulfilled the purposes of his grace.

Little wonder then that Mary magnifies the Lord and rejoices that he, her saviour, had, as she puts it in verse 48 there, looked on her.

He has not forgotten her. She has a role and a place in his plan of deliverance. But Mary sings not only because her heart is full of joy for herself, but because of what God says he will do for her

people and through them for the world.

They too are in his remembrance. Remember, we read from verse 54. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

[10:56] Generations later, we too join joyfully in Mary's song. Because Psalm 115, verse 12 is still true.

As it is in the old traditional version, the Scottish Psalter, the Lord has been mindful of us and will bless us.

And so too in 2 Timothy chapter 2 and verse 13. If we are faithless, he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself.

God is mindful. He remembers us. The second thing that we notice in these verses is that God is mighty and he rules over us.

We can find that in verse 49, the beginning of verse 49. For he who is mighty has done great things for me. And again in verse 51, he has shown strength with his arm.

[12:04] And verse 53. In fact, we can run through from verse 51 to verse 53 and see the various ways in which he has demonstrated the power of his arm.

We live in strange and worrying days. The old securities have gone.

In many ways, the unexpected and unpredictable is happening all the time. Obviously, the untamed coronavirus runs rampant and is uncontrolled.

There are many serious and unavoidable environmental challenges. There is upheaval and close to chaos in our politics. A few years ago, I remember a political commentator with more prescience than he realized, urging us to fasten our seatbelts as we travel to a new and uncharted political galaxy.

And those in the business and financial world have their worries too. One writer put it like this. He said, when the financial authorities themselves start to show surprise at how the markets react to their moves, one begins to wonder who, if anyone, is in charge.

[13:25] And that, of course, is the very nub of the matter. Who is in charge? And many wonder if our unpredictable and random world is completely out of control, if it ever was in control.

Those of you of my generation will remember, and some of you will have read, that when he was prime minister, a journalist once asked Harold Macmillan what would most likely blow his government's plans off course.

And he was supposed to have replied in that plummy voice of his events, dear boy, events. Is it any wonder then that events make many insecure and anxious?

The prevailing emotions in contemporary society appear to be shock and anger, fear and consternation, regret and disappointment, insecurity and foreboding.

And it doesn't offer much encouragement for the rising generation when you hear old people like me saying they would rather be going out of this world than coming into it.

[14:37] Everything seems random, uncontrolled, unpredictable. But Macmillan was wrong. We're not at the whim of events, political miscalculations, conspiracies, unexpected diseases, climate change, or what might be seen as just plain bad luck.

Mary teaches us that when problems arise and great upheavals happen on an international, national, communal, family or personal level, you can be sure that God is at work humbling the proud.

Listen, as Mary sings, he has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud. He has brought down the mighty and exalted those of humble estate.

He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich. He has sent away empty. What we learn here is that the natural priorities of our society, of our culture and of us as individuals are not necessarily God's priorities.

And when they are not his priorities, he doesn't respect them. Verse 51 has already reminded us that he topples the self-sufficient and knocks the proud off their perch.

[16:01] In verse 52, we see how God's control is on an international level. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, exalted those of humble estate.

And that's the idea behind that, of course, of the great empires. And they eventually collapse and crumble away to nothing.

In a way, God is seen here as a great revolutionary, turning this world upside down. Isn't that precisely what the apostles were accused of?

They went about preaching Jesus, calling people to faith in him. And they were accused of being men who turned the world upside down. And it has been commented on that that's not at all what they were doing in reality.

They were working with God to turn this upside down world the right way up. But God's revolution, for all that it is a revolution, is not callous and it's not cruel.

[17:10] We have friends in Hungary and the wife came from a wealthy family. And when Hungary became a communist state after the war, her family was given 15 minutes to fill a single suitcase.

And leave their comfortable home forever. But in the lives of his people, God works not to deprive, but to enrich.

But we don't always get it. John Newton wrote a poem to help explain why God works the way he does. And it contains these very sobering lines.

Let me read it. He made me feel the hidden evils of my heart and let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.

Yes, more with his own hand. He seemed intent to aggravate my woe. Crossed all the fair designs I schemed. Blasted my gourds.

[18:16] Reference, of course, to Jonah. And laid me low. Now we ask, why would God set out to make us feel bad? Why would he deprive us of things we love?

Why would he frustrate our plans? What on earth is he doing? Well, let me explain it this way. Every year I look forward, come the end of November, beginning of December, I look forward to putting up the Christmas tree.

I love the sparkle and the glitter, the greens and the gold, the fairy lights and the tinsel. I'm putting a little fairy on the top of the tree. She's been with us for nearly 50 years now, since we were married. And I love the reflection of that Christmas tree in the window on the dark evening. And it seems a symbol of comfort and holiness. But two weeks later, or at the most three, it looks tired and fake and tawdry.

And I can't wait to take it down and put the balls away. And, you know, that is what the Lord is doing when he shows me the things that I value are of little worth.

[19:28] He makes me see that what I think is my wealth is, in fact, a measure of my poverty. And then he shows me something much better, much bigger, much more blessed than all my tawdry trinkets.

At the spiritual level, God sends the rich away empty. Because their riches are not real riches, but fake and cheap and shoddy and cannot satisfy. And so John Newton's poem concludes by revealing God's logic.

These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set you free. And break your schemes of earthly joy. If you can find your all in me.

And this revolution, this turning of our world upside down, Mary says, is the loving work of a gracious and mighty ruler. He loves us enough to want the very best for us and will stop at nothing to deliver it.

In a world of downside up values, a world of chaos, we can find ultimate comfort, assurance and sanity in knowing that God rules the whole universe and governs the life of everyone in it, including Mary's and mine.

[20:53] So Mary, in the face of the stunning knowledge she has received, says, he who is mighty has done great things for me. With all the pain that it would cause.

And holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him throughout all generations.

And so finally, if God is mindful of us and remembers us, if he is mighty and rules over us, then Mary also shows us that he is merciful. And he redeems us.

Verses 47 and 50. Or 47 to 50. Mary, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior.

For he's looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me. And holy is his name.

[21:57] And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. God is merciful. He redeems us.

The situation that Mary's contemporaries faced, painful as it was, was really of their own making. If they felt abandoned by God and under his judgment, then they had only themselves to blame. They had strayed from his paths. They'd forgotten the seriousness of being his covenant people. They'd allowed themselves to be distracted by the potential pleasures or problems of this life. God was in second place or neglected altogether. His word wasn't consulted. His will, when it was known, was flouted. Little wonder then that worship declined and prayer became a call duty. As they abandoned him, so he withdrew from them, as he had said he would. And something similar is surely true of our own nation.

[23 : 08] Most of our troubles are self-inflicted. They're the consequence of spiritual unfaithfulness, moral waywardness, and a selfish preoccupation with ourselves.

Our land has no special claim upon God. We have squandered our spiritual capital. We have no entitlement to his blessing, which we've taken for granted.

And of course, he will never allow that. But let me press the point a little further. The historical situation of Israel in Mary's day was one thing.

The broad situation with regard to the state of our nation at the present is another. But we can take this principle right down to the personal level and look into our own hearts for a moment and measure ourselves by Jesus's standard.

And when we do, we have to admit that we have not loved the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind.

[24 : 22] nor have we loved our neighbour as ourselves. We may lament the current state of affairs, but lamentation itself changes nothing.

The words of two familiar hymns come to mind. First of all, Augustus Montague Toplady's hymn, Rock of Ages. It has these lines.

Could no zeal, sorry, could my zeal, no respite, no, could my tears forever flow, all for sin, could not atone.

And then some more simple, homely words by Robert Lowry, a Baptist preacher and theological professor. He wrote this, Weeping will not save me. We need to remember that regret is not repentance, and remorse is not redemptive.

So, is all lost then? Is there no way back? Must we abandon all hope of God's blessing and favour?

[25 : 42] Well, not according to Mary's song. Does her song not celebrate God, her Saviour? My spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour, the one who looks on the humble and does great things for them.

And isn't this all centred on Mary's son, the child called Jesus? His very name means the Saviour of his people.

And isn't he the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises of a Messiah? Isn't he the descendant of Abraham, who will bring God's blessing to humanity?

And is it not true that his miraculous conception kept Jesus free from inheriting sinful human nature and made him our perfect substitute, a sacrifice acceptable to God?

Yes, it was all this. What Mary even then understood and what she doubtless later came to grasp more fully and what really made her soul sing was the fact that behind all these troubles is a loving, caring and all-powerful God.

[27 : 07] A God who in infinite mercy redeems all who come to him in faith. And perhaps we need to make that journey.

We need to make it by way of a renewal of our covenant obligations and come back to the Lord. We maybe need to make that tonight for the first time.

Sitting in our homes, watching a screen, realising that we've never come to God to seek his pardon and to enjoy his grace.

And so in conclusion, Mary leads us to a fourth M. What Mary does in response to all she has heard and experienced is to magnify the Lord.

My soul magnifies the Lord, she says. But it's a curious expression. How do you magnify God?

[28 : 14] There are two very different kinds of magnifying. There is microscope magnifying and telescope magnifying.

Microscope magnifying makes small things appear large. And that was not Mary's kind of magnifying. She wasn't exaggerating God's goodness and love.

She wasn't blowing it up. What Mary does is telescope magnifying. A telescope brings nearer something that appears to be distant and helps us to better appreciate in some detail how glorious it

really is.

And we are called to act as telescopes to our society, to our communities, in our families. So that people can, through our lives, through our words and our example, appreciate more how wonderful and majestic and glorious God truly is.

How do you magnify God? Well, the words of the children's song catch it very well. And this little song always reminds me of our holiday clubs that we had in my first pastorate in the Free Church in Greyfriars and Inverness.

[29 : 40] We had the holiday clubs and when the mums were picking up the children, they'd be sitting in the foyer there waiting for them to come and singing choruses. And this was one that they used to sing with such gusto.

And we need to be singing this, metaphorically speaking at any rate, not necessarily reiterating the precise words, but telling the world, my God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing that he cannot do.

Like Mary, we magnify God by taking him seriously, putting him at the centre of our lives, making his priorities our priorities.

We magnify God when we pattern our lives on him so that others may see him in us. We magnify God by declaring to the world that he is more important to us than anything else, more important than our thoughts, our own hopes, and our own ambitions.

And you know, the psalmist anticipated Mary's Magnificat and he calls to us, O magnify the Lord with me.

[30 : 55] Let us exalt his name together. Let us exalt his name together.