

One From the Christmas Playlist

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[0 : 00] Please do turn back in your Bibles to the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Have these words open in front of you as we study what God has to say to us in his words today.

We probably all know that the power that song has is very different to other forms of communication. Because songs have the ability to capture a moment.

They have the ability to capture a memory. They have the ability to capture an emotion in a way that other things don't. One Scottish writer of yesteryear, a guy called Andrew Fletcher, said, let me write a nation's songs and I don't care who writes its laws because he recognised the power that lies in a song.

And so songs come to us in different arenas, in different forms, don't they? So in times of sorrow, you have songs that can express faith. The Lord is my shepherd. You can have songs that express defiance.

I did it my way. In times of victory, you get songs and tunes that almost become like anthems, synonymous with a victory. Think of that song, Yes Sir, I Can Boogie, after the Scotland national team actually won something for a change, or rather qualified something for something for a change.

[1 : 26] And a song becomes synonymous with an event. Now, in times of festivity, our ears pick up to the annual repertoire of Christmas tunes and songs and carols that started playing a lot earlier this year because of the pandemic and are still playing.

Our ears pick up to them. And so as well as us being able to see some of the sights of Christmas with various lighting round about, as well as some of the smells that we're beginning to absorb, so we're hearing the sounds of Christmas.

What I want us to do this morning is I want us to think of one of the most powerful songs that we can think of. It's a powerful song that connects to Christmas because actually it's part of a playlist that the Bible gives to us of songs that were sung before, during and after the birth of Jesus Christ. So today, the song we're going to think of is the first song in that playlist. And it takes us beyond the ballads of recent decades. It takes us beyond, back in history, past the 16th century where many of the Christmas carols started from.

It takes us past, beyond the 4th century, where there's particular tunes from the Roman period that were associated with Christmas. We're going back to the date line. The time where time itself was reordered from before Christ to Anno Domini, the year of the Lord, BC to AD, when Jesus, the very Son of God, who was coming specifically to save us from our sins, when he was going to arrive in this world.

[3 : 08] We're going to think today from verse 46 onwards about this song that Mary sung, because these are the original lyrics to accompany the wonder of the creator coming to be part of his creation.

And so the Magnificat is what this song is called. And this is a song that is sung. It's been written by Mary. So before we delve into the song itself, let me just spend a moment or two thinking about this songwriter, Mary, for a little while.

I suppose many of you will know that there have been throughout history various different child prodigies on the music scene. You can think probably of Mozart as being the most famous one of these.

Age seven, he was able to make compositions that were quite remarkable for the time. Now, Mary's not a child prodigy in the fact you have to be entertained for that, but she is young when she composes this remarkable song.

It shows a wisdom and a depth of understanding way beyond her natural years. It shows a level of Bible knowledge that she can take these truths, many of which are revealed in the Old Testament, and put them together in a song that captures exactly where she is at for herself.

[4 : 41] Now, Mary did not instigate the process that led to this song. We know that. That's part of the Christmas story. We realised that the orchestrator was God.

And the orchestrator sent a messenger to Mary with this message, a message from God, a message that she had to process, a message she then had to respond to.

And I just want us to note in passing that the way in which she receives and responds to that message from God is actually, or can actually be, an example for us as to how we receive and how we respond to the message of God to us.

So the first thing that this process that Mary goes through, the first reaction that we have for Mary is described for us in verse 29. She's just been told, greetings, because you're highly favoured.

The Lord is with you. And it says to us then that she was then greatly troubled. She was having to think through what she'd heard. She'd have to perhaps re-evaluate some of the things that she knew up until that point.

[5 : 54] And this wasn't simply a fleeting thought in her mind. This was something that she had to think seriously about because it was significant. So she's having to think.

Verse 30 then says to her that as well as thinking within her, this emotion of fear was welling up. So the angel says to her, do not be afraid. You've found favour with God.

Now, if I saw an angel or if you saw an angel, I'm pretty sure fear would be part of the reaction that we would have too. But there's a sense of fear as to what this is going to mean for her.

She's in the presence of an angelic being. She's been given a message from God. What is this going to lead to her? The next stage with Mary we see in verse 34.

She's been told what's going to happen. And she's now got questions. And she doesn't keep these questions to herself. She comes and she says, how will this be since I am a virgin?

[6 : 53] Now, it's very interesting to note that in this chapter, there's a right way of questioning and there's a wrong way of questioning God. So when Zechariah was given this revelation that his son born to him late in life was going to be the fulfilment of the prophecies, his reaction, his questioning reaction was a negative one.

Mary's, on the other hand, her questioning is not dismissing, but it's a genuine question. It's genuine trying to grapple with what's actually happening here. How is this going to work itself out?

And, of course, we come across people who may speak to us about our faith and they will come with their questions. And some will think they're very smart with their questions. And their questions will be designed to almost trip us up and see what we do know or what we don't know.

Or perhaps, as far as they're concerned, their questions are trying to expose the folly of our thinking. Whereas other people come to us with genuine questions. And you know the difference.

Well, Mary here is questioning. She wants to know. She wants to understand. And so as the answer is given, we then see Mary, verse 38, with this willing, submissive response to God.

[8 : 03] I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled. And then the angel left her. And so she's thinking. And there's an emotional impact.

And there's questioning. And then there is the submission to what God is saying. And in these stages, we see that this is what broadly happens when somebody comes to a faith.

So when we hear the word of God to us and we hear it properly, it impacts our minds because it makes us think of things that we didn't think of before. It confronts us.

It confronts us with the reality of God's word into our situation. It reminds us that God knows about us. And that can be quite unsettling.

And the implications of that knowledge can then actually lead us to a sense of fear. If God knows what I'm really like, if God knows the things about me that nobody else knows, how can I possibly stand before God?

[9 : 02] And of course, what is that? That's questioning. But that's the right sort of questioning. And the right sort of questioning finds answers from God, just as Mary found an answer from the angel.

So we find an answer in God's word, reminding us that, yes, he knows all about us. But he still invites us to himself to know his cleansing, his forgiving, to know his hope and his joy and his peace, all these things.

And yet, having experienced that word, that answer to our questions, there is that response of turning and trusting, repenting and believing, submitting willingly to God's direction in our lives. And so that can happen very, very quickly in some people's lives. In other people's lives, it happens over many months and many years.

For some, it happens maybe when they're a teenager or even younger. That might be you today. And it is God's word to you, telling you that he knows all about you, telling you that he's got a message for you, asking you to follow and to serve.

[10:08] Or you may be in your 80s or 90s, and you've heard this message many times. But now is the time to willingly come before God with a submissive heart.

I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled. And so Mary, recognising her own need of a saviour, because she says that in the opening lines of this song, has come to a position of faith, trust, hope in God.

And she is, in that sense, an example for us. So that took a slightly longer than I thought. I'll catch up as we go on. So I want us to notice three things from this remarkable song. Three things that Mary makes clear for us as she's led by God's spirit to compose this message.

The first thing is this. Mary is amazed because God is mindful of her. Look at this opening words of the song. My soul glorifies the Lord.

My spirit rejoices in God, my saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

[11:21] What's that saying to us? Well, that saying to us that Mary is, quite frankly, amazed. That God knows anything about her. That God has taken any notice of her whatsoever.

This blows her mind. To think that the God who created everything, the God who sustains everything, the God who knows the motive behind every movement in our body and in our minds, that this God would actually take notice of her.

She's going to go on in this song and talk about how God lifts up and takes away kingdoms from people. And yet he notices her. I mean, she's a teenager.

She is in a generation that women were not given the status that they ought to have. She's from a place that nobody wanted to admit they were from.

And out with her family, she'd be largely unimportant. This blows her mind that she may be unimportant to others. Even perhaps she may think she's unimportant herself.

[12:25] But she's not unimportant to God. Because God knows all about her. He knows her inside and out. He knows that she needs a saviour.

He knows that she's like every other person who walked on this earth, who has existed in an environment where our natural habitat has been polluted by sin.

That's the arena she was born into. That's the arena she lived in. And that's why she confesses in verse 47, My spirit rejoices in God, my saviour.

She recognises she needs a saviour like me and like you. The only person who didn't need a saviour was the child that was going to be born from her womb.

And so she is one who realises that apart from God's intervention, there's no salvation. And now God has intervened, so there is salvation.

[13:25] And God has intervened that having saved her, she is now sent on a particular mission. A mission that's unique to her. A mission that's going to impact this world.

But that same principle applies. That when we experience the saving work of God, when we are saved by God, we are saved for a purpose. And we are sent on to that mission field that God has given to us, that this world might hear.

That there is hope and there is joy. And it's found in Jesus Christ. And so we are saved in order to be sent and to serve on his mission, wherever that might be.

At home, work with our neighbours, in her congregation, wherever that might be. Like her, we are saved for a purpose. And so Mary is, her mind is blown.

God knows her. God has saved her. God is sending her. What is that saying? It's reminding us that God is not distant. God is not disinterested.

[14:31] That God is not remote. He is not aloof. That God is one who is interested, who is near, who does care.

And that is a truth that continues down the generations. The baby that was to be born through Mary, earlier on in the Bible, and one of the great promises about Jesus, is that he was going to be

Emmanuel, which means God with us.

God is not at a distance and disinterested in how we live and what we face. In fact, it's the complete opposite the Bible says. God is so interested, he is so concerned, that he has come near in Jesus Christ in order to save us.

The whole message of Christmas that leads to the message of Easter, that leads to the message of the return of Jesus Christ in power, is of a God who knows and a God who cares.

And so let me stop here. And let me remind you today that it does not matter what burden you have carried today, over these months, over this year.

[15:54] There is not a burden that you have carried. There is not a stress that you have had to bear. There is not a trouble that you have had to face. There is not a hurt that you have had to live with, that God doesn't know about.

God is mindful of you, just as he is mindful of Mary. And God is mindful to the extent that he comes close. He comes close in Jesus, the one who we can lean on, the one that we can trust in, the one whose help can keep us through the toughest of days.

You might be going through one of these toughest of days today. I want you to remember that God is mindful of you. Other people might not be, but God is.

And I pray that that truth will sink deeply into your own heart. So the first thing in this song, God is mindful. Second thing in this song, Mary reminds us that God is mighty.

So from now on, all generations will call her blessed. Well, that's happened. For the mighty one has done great things for me. And then she goes on in verse 51. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm.

[17:06] So she's saying to us, God is both mindful, aware of us, and he is mighty. He is all powerful. He is sovereign.

There is nobody who can somehow defeat God. He is in a category, a league of his own. And so some people may then turn around and say, well, I'm struggling with this.

Because if God is mindful and he does know what this world is like, and if God is mighty and he's all powerful, why doesn't God intervene in this world? Why doesn't he intervene and do something about the evil that is in this world?

And it doesn't take us long to live in this world to realize that there is evil. There's violence and there is injustice. There is disease. There is death.

There are tsunamis. There are hurricanes. There's all these things that would come into the category of evil. And we see that. The Bible also tells us unnervingly that evil is not simply on the outside.

[18:10] It's on the inside. And so when I try and answer that question as to why does God not do something about it, I would say, well, that's exactly what God is doing. And what God is doing is that he is not contending himself to deal with the symptoms.

He's going to deal with the root cause of the issue. You see, the symptoms of the problem are injustice and broken relationships and tension and hatred and violence and hurricanes and all these things.

That is the symptom, the symptom of what, you may ask, the symptom of the root problem of a world in rebellion to God because of sin. And if Jesus has come, to save his people from their sins, that is the root cause.

That is the issue that needs to be dealt with. Now, of course, we know what it's like. Perhaps, and it might be your situation today, symptoms. Some of us live with symptoms that can be so harsh that all we can think of is that we want the symptoms to stop.

And it might be pain or it might be insomnia or it might be fatigue or it might be dizziness. It might be a whole host of things, but the symptoms are so severe.

[19:23] We want them to stop at all costs. Now, if we went to a doctor and we said that to them and the doctor, the physician, just merely dealt with the symptoms, he or she would not be doing what he or she ought to have done because masking the symptoms doesn't deal with the problem.

So the problem will come back with a greater force. What God has done, the mindful, mighty one, is he has come to deal with the root problem, the root cause of sin.

He is the warrior entering the arena ready to face the foe, ready to face Satan and sin once and for all, to defeat Satan and sin once and for all.

And so that is who God is. You see, a lot of our Christmas songs, they talk about, you know, about broken loves in the past or they talk about hopes for others, you know, and they're not going to know about, there's not going to be any snow in Africa this Christmas.

Well, there might be on the top of some of these hills. But they talk about themselves or they talk about others. This is a song that speaks about God. The very first Christmas song speaks about God.

[20 : 36] He is mindful and he is mighty. But maybe he sees a third thing, a final thing. Because knowing, for us knowing that God is mindful of us, that he knows all about us and for us to know that God is mighty, that he's all powerful, that actually doesn't deal with our root problem.

It doesn't deal with our heart. Because that understanding of God being mindful, knowing you on the inside as well as on the outside and me, it's unsettling.

God being mighty and powerful. Well, what hope do we have to stand before a God who is mindful and mighty? Well, the answer is given to us in verse 50 here, where Mary says that his, in verse 50, his mercy extends to those who fear him.

And then verse 54, he has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful. For somebody to have an understanding of God that has God's knowledge, has been mindful of us and God's power, his mightiness, that's not a fully orb'd understanding of who God is.

That's not revealing the heart of God to us. Because if you want to know the heart of God, you've got to understand something of God's mercy. The mercy of God reveals the heart of God.

[21 : 59] Yes, God is sovereign and he is good. Yes, he is great and he is gentle. Yes, he is mighty, but he is also tender.

Because God is mindful, he's mighty, and he's merciful. And we need that mercy. We need that mercy every stage of our relationship with God.

We need that mercy to experience that original rescue, that salvation, to know God as our saviour. It might be useful for you to read this later on, but in Luke chapter 18, Jesus gives us a parable of two men who went to pray.

And one guy's a religious guy and he's, you know, probably a finite, upstanding member of the community. He attends church both services on a Sunday. He's a guy who'll be at a midweek meeting.

He'll be, he doesn't just tithe, he tithes more than that. And he tells people about it. He's serving on whatever opportunity he has to. And if people want to, you know, think about, well, what is, what does someone who follows God look like?

[23 : 04] Well, externally, this is the guy. And he comes to, comes before God and he says, God, you know, I'm thankful I'm not like these other people. I don't do this or that. I do this and that.

And really, God, in many ways, you should be thankful for me. The other guy that came to pray, he couldn't even lift his head. And all he could utter was, Lord, have your mightiness on me?

No. Have, are you mindful of me? Well, yes, but that's not what I need. No. Lord, have mercy on me. Because I cannot, I cannot expect or offer anything else.

All I can hold to is your mercy. You see, for someone to see their need is actually a spiritual need. That all the other things in our lives that we think may be the answer, they're actually not because the deep answers to life about hope and belonging and identity that all found in our relationship with God, our creator.

And to be in that relationship with God, we need to throw ourselves on his mercy. And so to experience the rescue of God, we need his mercy. And maybe that describes some of you today.

[24 : 21] But maybe some others of us, it's not that original rescue that we need, but we need that restoration. And for that restoration, we also need God's mercy, don't we?

Think of David, a man described in the Bible, a man after God's own heart. And yet there were times when he did things that couldn't have been further from God's own heart.

And so when his lust led to adultery and he took Bathsheba, and when his adultery led to conspiracy that led to murder of Bathsheba's husband, when he's been exposed for that, what is it that he comes before God saying?

And we have that given to us in Psalm number 51, where he opens that Psalm and he says, have mercy upon me, O God, according to your mercy, deal with me.

There was another incident, perhaps less famous, where we have the mercy of God listed for us as well. And that's this time, David maybe took a rush of blood to the head, who knows what was going

on with him, but he decides he's going to count as fighting men, which is almost a symptom of a deeper problem that he was beginning to trust in his army and physical things rather than in God. [25 : 40] And he was warned not to do this, but he went ahead nonetheless. And eventually he was addressed by a message from God and he was given three options as to what's going to happen.

Three months of famine, three months being swept away before your enemies or three days of the sword of the Lord coming through the nation.

What a choice. What would you choose? Well, David made his choice and this is what he said. 1 Chronicles 21, I'm in deep distress, no wonder.

Let me fall into the hands of the Lord for his mercy is very great, but do not let me fall into human hands. Maybe we need to be restored today.

And part of the pain of being restored is acknowledging the messes that we've made. we can be restored today because God is a merciful God towards his people.

[26 : 42] And when we come repenting, confessing our sin, again, looking to his fresh mercy today, we can know his restoration. Just like for the first time today, if you come repenting and believing, you can know his rescue because he is a merciful God and he is a mighty God.

He is a mindful God. And these are the truths of this first Christmas song that we can hold on to, we can praise God with, that we can delight in, and that we can see the power of song to capture such a significant event, revealing the wonder of God who knows, who has the strength, and who cares because he is near.

So God is mindful. God is mighty. And we praise his name, his holy name, because he is merciful. Amen.