

**“Mary Magnifies God” | Luke 1:46-55
(Scripture Set to Worship)**

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(Discussion questions on page 8)**

Dante Alighieri died over 700 years ago. A year before his death, he published his poem, *The Divine Comedy*, which some call “one of the essential books of mankind.”¹

The poem has 14,233 lines, and is an allegory for the soul’s journey toward God. It follows Dante as he descends to the bottom of hell, then up to the heights of heaven—along the way meeting characters from the Bible and history. Both hell and heaven are structured in nine circles, or stages.

The nine circles of hell represent various deadly sins, each moving persons further from God and closer to the devil. The ninth circle is marked by the sin of treachery (betrayal, unfaithfulness). The person at its bottom is Judas Iscariot—the man who betrayed Jesus. Dante sees him hanging from the mouth of Satan, and his guide explains:

That soul that suffers most, is Judas Iscariot, he who kicks his legs on the fiery chin and has his head inside (*Inf.* 34.60).

Dante is making a point. He sees pride at the core of sin. For Dante pride is love of self, perverted to hatred for neighbor and God.² Judas’ pride went so far as pushing the Son of God out of the world.

The poem, however, ends in heaven not hell. Dante is finally brought to the ninth circle of heaven, meeting various other characters in the journey. Who does he find in the ninth circle of heaven? His guide tells him to raise his eyes,

*But now look at the face which to the Christ
is most resemblant; for its light alone
can make thee ready to behold the Christ.”*

Dante, lifting his gaze, sees a woman,

*I saw such gladness raining down on her,
borne by those holy minds, created such
that they might fly across those altitudes,
that whatsoever I had seen before*

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/on-the-road-with-dante/>

² On pride in Dante’s *Inferno*, see <https://www.danteinferno.info/7-deadly-sins.html#:~:text=%2D%20the%20seventh%20deadly%20sin%20is,which%20all%20the%20others%20arise.>

*ne'er held me with such admiration poised,
nor showed me such resemblance unto God.*

*And that same love which first descended there, [Dante sees Gabriel, announcer to Mary]
"Mary, O Favored One, grace to you," singing,
spread out his open wings in front of her.
And on all sides the beatific Court
made such an answer to the song divine,
that every face became the more serene.³*

Dante has placed Judas at the bottom of hell, and Mary at the top of heaven. Judas, exemplar of pride, Mary, exemplar of humility. Pride pushes God out; humility invites God in. Mary—in her humble awareness of her own need and sin, or her mere finitude—becomes, literally, a womb where God may dwell.

Mary has long drawn our attention. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan, in his book, *Mary Through the Centuries*, writes, "The Virgin Mary has been more of an inspiration to more people than any other woman who ever lived."⁴ Yet, Pelikan notes, "the Bible's references to her are tantalizingly brief," and much of what is thought of her is rooted more in tradition than Scripture.

Today we turn to one of the Bible's rare windows onto Mary—The *Magnificat*, recorded in Luke 1:46-55, titled after its first word in Latin translation, which means *magnify*.

I want to listen to Mary's song with you today, not merely taking in its content, but paying attention to Mary's actions along the way. We are in a series called *Scripture Set to Worship*. Here we have a portion of Scripture not only set to worship in the Book of Common Prayer, but set as a song in its original form. How does the fact that something is set as a song, rather than mere words, impact how we understand it? Singing seems to involve more of the person—the body and emotions? So we need to ask how Mary's *manner* sheds light on the *Magnificat's meaning*. We'll notice three things about her manner: a (1) Movement, (2) Posture, and (3) Mood.

I. Movement: Godward

Text: When we take in the larger scene, we discern a movement in Mary's focus. When Mary arrives at her cousin Elizabeth's home, her relative rings out with praise directed at Mary:

Blessed are you among women.... And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord (1:42, 45).

Attention is set upon Mary.

³ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, vol. 3, (*Paradiso*) (English trans.) (Harvard University Press), Canto 32.85-95.

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 2.

But next Mary breaks into song, and the focus shifts not just to Mary, but to Mary and God—what God has done for Mary: Mary says,

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... ⁴⁹ he who is mighty has done great things for me” (1:46-49).

Attention is set upon God and Mary.

But then another movement happens, beginning with the last phrase in vs 49, “holy is his name,” and continuing down to verse 55. Here, Mary fades out of the picture, so to speak, and we are looking solely at God in His might and mercy:

⁵⁰ 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....” (Luke 1:50-55).

Our eyes are fixed upon God—who He is, what he does, for all generations.

Here, then, is the movement we observe when we observe Mary: from *selfward* to *godward*. From her own blessedness, to losing herself in a vision of God’s greatness.

The Godward Turn Cures Soul

Martin Luther pictured the sinful human as a soul “curved inward on itself” (*incurvatus in se*). Augustine pictured the soul as a war of loves, where love of self warred against love of God. You can only love yourself properly, Augustine found, when you love God properly.

If sin is man curved inward, salvation is man curved upward. Like a withered flower, sensing finally the rays of the sun, lifts its head toward its salvation—so too, Mary’s soul lifts its eyes godward in the Magnificat.

E.g., Friday Evening Parade: Friday evening a family in the church invited me to join them at the Marine Barracks in town for famed Friday Evening Parade. It’s a glorious event. As the sun sets, the United States Marine Band, Drum and Bugle Corp, and Silent Drill Platoon—and more—perform beautifully. And there is a movement to the evening. It opens by noting distinguished guests, next attention is fixed on the Marines, performing in breath-taking symmetry. But the weightiest moment is when all lights are turned off save a single spotlight, drawing our attention upward to the American Flag, high above the Barracks, blowing gallantly in the summer wind. Everyone stands to their feet, Marines salute, and for a moment we are all caught up in something greater than ourselves—a sense of gratitude fills the breast—the individual is swallowed up in a moment of glory.

Have you experienced the tonic of self-forgetfulness, when a vision of something great subdues the ache of self-consciousness. A hiker before the Grand Canyon; an Olympian tearing up as her national anthem plays; a theater goer hardly able to rise at the close of a great performance.

The soul grows wings, said Plato, as it beholds value.⁵

What does your soul fixate upon? Is there anything before its eyes that takes its breath away? Are you able, in the events of light, to follow the beam of sunlight from its glow upon this world, upward to its source?

Do you recognize the design and gift of God in the face of your child? Do you see the providence of God behind each breath you take? When you look at the world, do you grasp that all things are from God, for God, and to God?

This is the first thing we learn when we consider Mary's manner—the soul is made for a movement, from selfward to godward. Second, we notice something about Mary's posture—the disposition of her heart.

II. Posture: Humility

Text: The theme of humility runs throughout the song: God shows mercy to those who “fear him” (v.50), “exalts those of humble estate” (v.52), and Israel is called “the servant of the Lord” (v.54). And this is the posture of Mary. She describes herself as the Lord's “servant” and refers to her “humble estate” (v.48).

Mary's humility is expressed not merely in her social status—a meager background, from a no-name part of the world, Galilee—, but in her attitude. She has a low estimation of herself, meaning, not that she is mired in self-loathing, but grasps what it means to be a mere human being, a creature of God, needy for his provision and mercy.

Her song bears witness to a principle that sounds across Scripture: *God resists the proud, but draws near to the humble*. Verses 50-52

His mercy is for those who fear him.... He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate (vv. 50-52).

Pride is our tendency to assume we are, finally, to credit for what we have, who we are, and for procuring our future. Pride is our tendency to believe we know better than God, to find his Word silly or far-fetched, to believe our wisdom is greater than his. And Scripture is terrifying in relaying God's hatred of it:

Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. (Prov 8:13).

⁵ Plato uses this image of the soul growing wings in *Phaedrus*, as the soul re-learns how to perceive value.

There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: ¹⁷ haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood (Prov 6:16).

The Lord GOD has sworn by himself, declares the LORD, the God of hosts: "I abhor the pride of Jacob...." (Amos 6:8).

God opposes the proud (James 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5).

And on the other hand, Scripture comforts in the promise of humility:

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (1Pet. 5:5)

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Is. 57:15)

This is the pattern to God's work across the Bible: God draws near to, and works through, the humble.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the message of the Cross is foolishness to the worldly-wise and proud, but salvation to those humble enough to live by faith:

it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe... ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Cor 1:20-21, 25).

Paul goes on to describe the Corinthians themselves,

consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor 26-30).

Why does God work this way—resisting the proud, but lifting up the lowly? Two reasons:

First, because God acts in accordance with reality; he cannot lie. And a person who arrogantly acts like the salvation of the world or themselves comes by their own strength is living a lie. As in the case of a Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar, God resists such ignorance and arrogance.

But secondly, God resists our pride but exalts us in our humility, because he is for our happiness. The proud person is turned inward, enamored with him or herself. They are sick. If God were to bless great men because of their greatness, he would risk leading them into darkness. But if instead, God were to come to us in our need, he would train us—like the Sun pulling a flower towards it—to look up to him, instead of ourselves. And in doing so, God would cure our souls.

If you are a Christian suffering or in need, despite how counter-intuitive this may feel, see your circumstances of lowliness as an opportunity to grow in humility. Leverage them to foster dependence on God. If God draws near to the lowly, then weakness is to the Christians advantage.

If you are proud, and few God as a crutch for the weak, I would encourage you to ask yourself some tough questions: Are you the author of your life? Did you give yourself existence? Can you, in your own wisdom, solve the riddles of life? Is your conscience really so clean? Friend, if you will humble yourself before God's son, and simply say to Him that you need him, He may this very night draw near to you.

How about the culture of our church? Do we manifest a culture of strength? Will God bless us because we are gifted, hardworking, smart? Or do we know that it is the places of our dependence—desperate prayer, submission to Scripture, asking for guidance—that God uses?

[T] There is the movement of Mary, *Godward*, and the posture of Mary, *humble*. Finally, let us end by noting the Mary's mood.

III. Mood: *Gratitude*

By mood, I mean what is the emotional atmosphere arising from Mary in this scene. I do not mean to reduce this to mere emotionalism, but to recognize that one of the *points* of moving from merely saying something, to singing about it, has to do with emotions. By her song, Mary expresses the emotions of her heart.

We could say her mood is one of joy or happiness—and this would be true. Or we could say her mood is one of confidence, as she extols God's strength and might in the past, present, and future: "his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation" (v.50).

But I think a more accurate description would be *gratitude*. Mary is overflowing with a grateful heart. What is she grateful for?

God has acted to save *her*. God's overarching pattern of lifting up the lowly, of helping those who are humble, has found its way into her own life. And notice how deep this runs. In her opening words she speaks of her soul and spirit:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior (vv 46-47).

We know how one might sing with their lips, but how does one *magnify* with their soul? This transcends mere sound. Mary's soul is doing all it can to express the greatness of God. And why? She gives two reasons in verse 48 and 49.

for (=because) he has looked on the humble estate of his servant (v48)

for (=because) he who is mighty has done great things for me (v49)

Mary has experienced first, God's attention. He sees her. He takes notice of *her*. We are reminded of Hannah in the Old Testament, who says, "you are the God who sees me" (Genesis 16).

But this is not a general *noticing*. Mary goes on in v. 49 to speak of the "mighty one who has done *great things for me*" (v49). Here she is speaking of the sending of Jesus. Mary understands, somehow from Gabriel's announcement, that the child she is with is not merely her son, but the Son of God. He will not merely bring joy to her home, but by defeating sin and death, will bring eternal joy to God's people.

And this tunes the mood of Mary's heart into a mood of gratitude. She is so very, very *grateful* to God.

It is crucial to notice that the *circumstances* of Mary's earthly life will not always evoke a mood of happiness: She will have to bear the scandal of being pregnant before marriage. She will have to flee to Egypt when Jesus is a baby for safety from Herod's blood-rage. She will learn, in her experience, the truth of Simeon's prophecy over the Christ-child, that

this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also)..." (Lk 2:34-35).

Mary will stand-by, as her son is mocked, flogged, spit on and crucified (John 19:25-27). At times, I am sure, Mary does not quite understand how God's good purposes, for and in her son, are unfolding (e.g., John 2:3-4).

But in all these things, she knows God is *for* her, and by faith, *believes* that what God has said about her Son, and what this means for her and God's people, will come to pass. And this place in her soul, where the grace of God settles within the womb of faith and obedience, becomes for her an ever-increasingly place for gratitude.

Friends, life will give you many reasons to be angry and frustrated. Causes for grievance and offense abound. But at the bottom of a healthy heart, is an awareness that God has acted toward you in *mercy*—his undeserved kindness, expressed so vividly in the gift of his son.

Have you experience God's salvation in Jesus Christ? Have you tasted the sweetness of the God who resists you in your pride, but comes rushing toward you in your need? Have you sensed

what God is acting to save you from—how he works tirelessly to preserve you from a life of addiction to sin, of failing into meaninglessness, of living only for things that will eventually fade away. Do you know this child, that came into Mary's life, has come for your joy?

Like Mary, let us move our gaze from ourselves toward God, let us cultivate a posture of humility in our hearts, and let us ponder the many reasons we have to be grateful to God—for, to those who fear him, his mercy is from generation to generation, it comes in wave after wave.

Small Group Questions

1. Mary opens her song, "My soul magnifies the Lord" (Lk 1:46). What does your soul magnify? Complete this sentence for yourself: "My soul magnifies _____."
2. Luke 1:46-55 is set in the form of a song. Why does God want us not only to speak about him, but to sing about, and to, him? What role does singing to God play in your life? Do you find singing during the church service easy or difficult?
3. Mary is marked by her humility. Her song reminds us that God resists the proud and draws near to the humble. What are some ways that pride may operate in our hearts and lives? How might God be resisting our pride as individuals or as a church?
4. Mary is grateful for what God has done for her, and therefore the mood of her song is one of gratitude. What mood marks your life right now? How might you cultivate more gratitude toward God?