

The Song of Mary

Prelude to Bethlehem – Part III

Luke 1:26-56

Introduction

In our last two discussions, we have uncovered some of the most beautiful music ever composed and sung in relation to the incarnation of God the Son. Before the birth of Jesus, long before the singing of the angels in the countryside, there was a musical prelude to Bethlehem.

The prophet named Isaiah, penned the immortal words, in Isaiah, chapter 9, verse 6,

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; . . .

(and you can almost hear the strains of Handel's *Messiah* as it includes Isaiah's lyrics . . .),

. . . and His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Not only did a prophet sing, but a priest sang as well. Once the tongue of Zacharias was loosened, he burst into a song that he had been composing for nine months. He would sing a song, as recorded in verses 68 through 79 of Luke, chapter 1, about the "Sunrise from on high" who would end the night of darkness and bring the dawn of everlasting life.

Perhaps the youngest person to compose a hymn about the coming birth of Christ, was a young girl named Mary. She would be visited by the angel Gabriel and later, she herself would sing of the Messiah's coming birth.

Without a doubt, music and the birth of Christ are inseparable.

The Introduction of Mary

Now, before we rush to the lyrics of Mary's hymn, let us first discover Mary's setting, her surprise, her submission and then, her song.

Mary's Setting

We discover Mary's family setting in the first chapter of Luke. Look at verse 26.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth

Now stop! That is enough to send shivers down the orthodox Jewish spine. Gabriel has come with the most significant message to ever be delivered to the human race. He is winging his way through the galaxies to planet earth to specifically deliver the news that the Messiah is about to be born. And he comes, not to Judea, where God has worked throughout the centuries, but instead, ignores Judea and comes to Nazareth.

Nazareth was polluted with Gentiles and Romans. It was unclean and of no distinction among the Jews. It was a shoddy, corrupt, halfway stop between the port cities of Tyre and Sidon. The rumor would eventually begin, and is believed to this day by liberals, that Mary had a dalliance with a Roman soldier and called the baby the name, Jesus.

When Nathaniel was called to become one of Christ's disciples and heard that Jesus had come from Nazareth, he said, as recorded in John, chapter 1, verse 46,

. . . *Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? . . .*

Nazareth was “the other side of the tracks”.

Furthermore, by going to Nazareth, Gabriel, and God who sent him, was ignoring the holy city and the most holy place in all of Israel – the temple. Surely the news would be delivered to them; surely the mother of the Messiah would be one of the high priest’s daughters, or someone attached to the well connected families of Jerusalem.

Gabriel, however, ignored the religious and the well bred. He flew on past the pious, the educated, and the most likely homes to raise the Messiah. Luke informs us that Gabriel instead, went to Nazareth.

Now, continue to verse 27 of Luke, chapter 1.
to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.

Ladies and gentlemen, the greatest news ever to hit planet earth was delivered in the most unlikely city and to the most unlikely person. The message was delivered to an illiterate teenager, who was as poverty stricken as those around her.

Mary was a girl whose only bright spot in life was that she was engaged. Her parents had successfully negotiated with another Jewish couple who had a son named Joseph. Neither family was wealthy. According to one third century source, Joseph made plows and other tools for the farmers and ranchers living around him.

The irony of these two families is in their family tree! Not the tree in their front yard, but the tree in the flyleaf of their huge copy of the King James Bible that sat on their coffee table. I am sure they had one – everybody has one of those. The Bible with all the gilded pages and, in the front, pages where you can record who your uncles and aunts and grandparents are.

If you track Joseph and Mary’s family tree, you will go all the way back to David. This poverty stricken couple were rightful heirs to the throne of their ancestor, King David himself. Ha! Joseph and Mary had royal blood flowing through their veins.

One author wrote,

But from all the indicators in scripture, her life would be anything but extraordinary. She would marry humbly, give birth to numerous poor children, never travel farther than a few miles from her home, and one day die, like

thousands of others before her – a nobody in a nothing town in the middle of nowhere.ⁱ

To this day, the gospel seems to fly past the proud, the well connected, and the religious. The gospel of the Messiah still comes to people who know they are needy; who know they are unworthy.

In the same way, the Messiah was born to a young girl who would never have been considered worthy. Mary was an illiterate girl who lived on the other side of the tracks.

Mary’s surprise

Life for Mary, however, is about to change forever. Look at verse 28 of Luke, chapter 1.

And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Continue to verses 29 and 30.

But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.”

The *Latin Vulgate* translated Gabriel’s opening remarks of verse 28, “Hail Mary, full of grace.”

If Luke had wanted to communicate that Mary was full of grace, he would have used the same Greek expression that he used of Stephen in Acts, chapter 6, where he wrote that Stephen was “full of [God’s] grace”.

Gabriel is simply telling Mary that she has been chosen by God, that she has found favor with God, not because of what she had done for God, but because of what God was about to do for her!

The *Vulgate’s* faulty translation, which implies that Mary was already filled with grace that she had merited on her own, gave rise to the corruption within the Roman church during the middle ages. They came to believe that Mary had every gift, even above those given to angels. This view gave rise to the idea that Mary could also become a dispenser of grace to humanity, which resulted in prayers being offered to her. These prayers often begin with an incorrect translation of the Greek language into Latin with the words, “Hail Mary, full of grace.”

There are two extremes you can reach in regard to Mary. These extremes are:

- to magnify Mary, or
- to ignore Mary.

One extreme is to effectively deify Mary. She would have to be divine to be able to hear millions of prayers and to then, dispense grace and influence the Father, as no one but God influences God.

For Mary to have a role of influencing the Triune God, she would have to be sinless and morally perfect. If the angel Gabriel is informing Mary that she was chosen by God because she was already full of perfect grace, then she would have had to have been somehow free from any kind of sin.

Kent Hughes wrote that this belief was in fact dogmatized on December 8, 1854, when the Pope declared the doctrine of the “Immaculate Conception”. The Pope said, “From the first moment of her conception, the Blessed Virgin Mary was kept free from stain of original sin.”

In other words, Mary never sinned. In fact, she did not have a sin nature; she was free from original sin.

The Bible never says anything of that nature. We do read, however, that:

- Jesus knew no sin (II Corinthians 5:21),
- Jesus did no sin (I Peter 2:22), and
- Jesus had no sin (I John 3:5).

Gabriel had not come to explain to Mary how she had been able to live a perfect life, free from corruption; he came to explain to Mary how she would conceive by God’s power and give flesh and blood to the Messiah.

Warren Wiersbe wrote, “When Gabriel approached Mary, Mary did not say, ‘It’s about time, I’ve been expecting you!’”ⁱⁱ

One extreme is to deify and to perfect and magnify the servant rather than the Sovereign. The other extreme is to ignore the servant; to want to stay so far away from the theological distortion that enlarges the role of Mary to co-redeemer and co-mediator, as to overlook an incredible young woman whose surrender to God is a model of submission and faith.

Mary’s submission

Notice what Gabriel goes on to say in verses 31 through 33.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.

Continue to verse 34.

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

You may remember that when Gabriel informed old Zacharias that he and his wife would have a son, Zacharias responded with doubt and demanded proof. Mary is not responding in the same way. She did not ask this question, in verse 34, because she doubted the promise, but because she did not understand the process.

Gabriel explained the miracle in verse 35a.

The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you

...

That word “overshadow” is the same word that is used in the Greek Old Testament to refer to the presence of God in the holy of holies – in the Jewish tabernacle and later, in the temple.

“Mary’s womb would become a holy of holies for the Son of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Mary responds by saying, in verse 38,

And Mary said, “Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

We know, from the other books of the gospel, that Mary’s submission eventually led her to inform Joseph. She tried to explain that her pregnancy was not the work of another man; she tried to tell him about the angel who had visited her. But Joseph did not buy it.

We cannot imagine the grief in both of their hearts. It seemed that:

- the woman Joseph had planned to marry had been unfaithful;
- the man Mary had planned to marry no longer trusted her.

However, Joseph still loved Mary. Matthew, in chapter 1, tells us that he did not want to disgrace her, so he planned to put her away privately.

But then, Joseph was visited by an angel during a dream. The angel revealed that Mary had been telling the truth and that he was to marry her and give the newborn baby the name, Jesus, “for He will save His people from their sins”.

So it was all true! This story about God and angels and conception by the Holy Spirit – Mary was telling Joseph the truth.

However, who would believe it? Their family wouldn't. Their neighbors wouldn't.

The *Talmud* would call Mary the mistress of Panthera, a Roman soldier, and Jesus would be considered illegitimate. In fact, years later, when Christ began his ministry, the Pharisees said to Him, in John, chapter 8, verse 41b,

... We were not born of fornication ...

There was someone, however, who would believe their story. An old couple, named Elizabeth and Zacharias, would believe. Mary fled to their home, which was located at least three days journey away. And, as soon as she arrived, Elizabeth's unborn son leapt in her womb and Mary and Elizabeth enjoyed fellowship as only the mothers of two miraculous babies could enjoy. They were:

- Elizabeth, the mother of the forerunner to the Messiah, and
- Mary, the mother of the Messiah.

The Song of Mary

Mary begins to sing a song that she must have been composing during her three day journey. Let us look at the ways she praised God in her song.

Mary praised God for her salvation

1. Mary praised God for her salvation.

Do not ever forget that Mary needed a Savior too. Like all of humanity, Mary needed redeeming, or saving, as well. Notice the lyrics in verses 46b through 47.

... My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

The words of another more recent song are similar in saying, "The One whom she delivered, would soon deliver her!"

Mary praised God for her testimony

2. Mary praised God for her testimony.

Continue in the lyrics to verse 48.

For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; for behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

Mary is in effect, saying, "Imagine, God would choose someone like me to do something like this!"

Mary praised God for His power

3. Mary praised God for His power.

Look at verse 49.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name.

Mary praised God for His mercy

4. Mary praised God for His mercy.

Look as Mary sang her praise to God in verse 50.

And His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him.

Mary praised God for displaying His sovereignty

5. Mary praised God for displaying His sovereignty.

Let me give you at least three ways in which Mary praised God for this.

- First, for exalting the humble.

Look at verses 51 and 52.

He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble.

- Secondly, for enriching the hungry.

Continue to verse 53.

He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed.

By the way, as you study this hymn, you will notice that each phrase is simply a quote from the Old Testament scriptures. Mary may have been unable to read, but as a faithful Jewess, she had memorized many of the passages of the Old Testament that she had been taught as a child.

Mary's thoughts of God were high and wonderful. The God she worshiped was able to save; was merciful and holy; was powerful and sovereign in His management of the world in which she lived. Mary's God was the God who exalted the humble, enriched the hungry, and who also displayed His sovereignty in a third way.

- Thirdly, for establishing the helpless.

Look at verses 54 and 55.

He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants forever.

Conclusion

In verse 56, we are then told,

And Mary stayed with her [Elizabeth] about three months, and then returned to her home.

Chuck Swindoll wrote, “Three months later, Mary returns to Nazareth to marry Joseph and sail into a storm of controversy that would last the rest of her life . . .”

This controversy has continued now for two thousand years.

The most difficult times to sing are during difficult times. This song says nothing of life in Nazareth. It does not provide an answer for Mary’s pain or coming sorrow. Or does it? It does, in fact, for it focuses on God; who is Savior, who is Sovereign, who is Merciful.

Those who have come by faith and surrender to this living Lord; those who have heard the message of the incarnation and have believed and placed their faith in this virgin born, Son of God, who did indeed come to seek and to save those who are lost, can sing this song of Mary.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/22/2002 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Luke, Volume One (Wheaton, IL, Crossways Books, 1998), p. 30.

ⁱⁱ Warren Wiersbe, Be Compassionate (Victor Books, 1988), p. 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 15.