



Luke's introduction to his gospel
luke 1.⁵-2.⁵²
part 4

Mary's magnificat
luke 1.⁴⁶⁻⁵⁶

Introduction

We now come to Luke's fourth introductory narrative with its accompanying oracle. The narrative revolves around Mary, mother of Jesus, and her inspired oracle, often referred to as *the Magnificat*. In Mary's oracle, we will see a number of themes already introduced in the first three oracles and their accompanying narratives.

We will see a continued emphasis on God's labor within the life of those who are barren. We will see that his labor in the life of the barren is an act of abundant grace and divine good will—a grace and good will previously promised and now accomplished. We will see that this labor of grace is unprecedented and takes unexpected forms. We will also see that the promised child's kingdom is based upon values and strategies that stand in stark contrast to the expectations and false values of human reason, morality, and governance.

Exalt them of low degree

Without going into detail, Mary faithfully acknowledges to God and man that until God reached out and touched her, she was not so very impressive a woman. At the very least, she was not deemed impressive by others. While the KJV seeks to soften the blow a bit, Mary

speaks forthrightly of her “low estate” and of her status as “handmaiden.” The word used here for low is almost universally derogatory. It is to be “mean,” “base,” “weak,” “poor,” “insignificant.” “Handmaiden” is a delicate word for slave. A slave, for whatever reason, is not their own person. They are not in control of their own life.

In Mary, then, we find someone much like Zacharias and Elisabeth: another barren soul in need of God’s merciful and powerful influence. It is surely significant that in all three adults to whom Luke has introduced us, we find individuals who think of themselves as something less than they wish to be, and are thought of by others as being less than they ought to be. It is just such people that Luke wishes to address and that Jesus comes to serve: “They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.”¹

In lifting and transforming Mary from her “low estate” to a state of “blessedness,” God has made a reality of her symbolic name—“to be high,” “lifted up,” “exalted”—not only in the moment or in mortality, but for eternity.

Putting down and exalting... filling and emptying

But Mary does not stop here. Her imagination is ablaze with new possibilities. From her own, lone transformational experience, Mary intuits a transformation more vast than any she could have imagined on her own. Indeed, she sees the earth with its nations, kingdoms, peoples, societies, and cultures shift before her very eyes. She sees them transformed into a previously unimaginable form: a form called “The Kingdom of God.” And she understands that it is her son, Son of David, Son of God, who inspires and is responsible for this unparalleled kingdom.

Mary is all too familiar with the world she has inherited. She knows its pecking order all too well. As her son would observe in just a few years—Did his mother, we wonder, play a role in his insight?—the strongest, the fittest, the mightiest take power into their own hands, often ensconcing themselves upon thrones of power.

¹ Luke 5.³¹

“Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them.”²

While these, with their favorites, their cronies, live comfortably, even luxuriantly, others, empty stomachs growling, are bent over engaged in the back breaking labor of picking through mounds of trash, hoping to find a scrape of edible something or other or a discarded piece of worn and broken trash they might use back at their hovel or sell for the price of a small bit to eat.

This is the wicked way of a fallen and evil world.

“It is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin.”³

But now, Mary sees that contrary to “The Preacher’s” claim, there *is* a “new thing under the sun” after all.⁴ We can imagine her wonder when, with an eye of faith, she sees the powerful violently thrown from their thrones; observes the wealthy and comfortable desperately picking through the city dump for bare survival. We can, perhaps, imagine her joy as she watches the weak and vulnerable suddenly empowered; suddenly eating like kings.

Mary comes to realize that this babe, her son, has come to turn the world with its false and twisted value systems upside down, inside out, topsy-turvy! He is a world destroyer. He will stretch out his powerful arm and destroy one world in order to create another. This “reversal of fortune” and dismantling of false value systems is, in fact, one of her son’s principle labors and objectives. And so, it becomes a theme to which Luke returns over and over again. Now is not the time to go into detail, but here, in no particular order, is but a sampling of Luke’s surprising and illuminating reversals.

² Luke 10.⁴²

³ DC 49.²⁰

⁴ See Ecclesiastes 1.⁹

The “King of kings” is born in a feeding trough.
The “Holy One of God” participates in an ordinance for sinners.
Jesus pronounces blessedness upon the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated.
Jesus pronounces a woe upon the rich, the full, the happy, the popular.
The first are last and the last are first.
Heaven rejoices over one lost sheep more than over the sheep never lost.
What is “highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.”
A sinner leaves the temple “justified,” while a “righteous” man leaves condemned.
A single widow’s two mites is worth more than every rich man’s abundance.
Israel encouraged to be more like a Sidonian widow and a Syrian leper.
“The queen of the south” and “the men of Nineve” held up as examples to Israel.
A Samaritan becomes a hero at the expense of a Levite and a High Priest.
The “fountain of righteousness” participates in the same fate as two criminals.

īn remembrance of his mercy

In lifting Mary from her “low estate,” God has made a reality of her symbolic name—“to be high,” “lifted up,” “exalted.” In addition to her own name, Mary’s Magnificat incorporates the symbolic meaning of two others’ names—Zacharias and John.

“He hath holpen his servant Israel,
In remembrance of his mercy...”

“His mercy is on them that fear him
from generation to generation.”

Mary reminds us of one of Luke’s central messages: God is about to act with an abundance of mercy. As the reader proceeds through Luke’s work, he will be wise to be on the lookout for the myriad testimonies and evidences of this reality.

In Mary's Magnificat, we sense Mary's wonder and joy at the Lord's surprising and merciful actions in her life. Being of "low estate," barren like her cousin in so many ways she nevertheless experiences the mercy and power of God in ways that transform above and beyond the pinched expectations of a vain and fallen world with its false values.

As we learn to "hope in his mercy," we will find that our barrenness has no impact on God's capacity to work in our lives. He will lift us from our "low estate" and do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to [his] power that worketh in us."⁵ Such hope in us and mercy in God will leave the world shaking its head in sorrow for its having settled for such pitifully small rewards as this fallen world has to offer.

43 But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be a great among you..." (Luke 10.43)

Not many years later, Mary will watch in amazement as her son transforms common, everyday, taken-for-granted water into the very best tasting of wines. The transformation that God brings to Mary's lowly life and that Jesus produces inside common jars of clay is precisely the gracious transformation that Mary's un-paralleled son will bring into the lowliest of lives "from generation to generation," worlds without end. For all of this, Mary will name her God, "Holy," something, or someone utterly apart, distinct, unique. There is no one and no thing even remotely like him.

"His name, alone, is excellent."⁶

Ps 2? Kingdoms putting down.

⁵ Ephesians 3.²⁰

⁶ Psalm 148.¹³

In all of this, we are reminded of the words of the Psalmist:

“He delighteth not in the strength of the horse:
he taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man.
The LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him,
in those that hope in his mercy.”⁷

This is at the heart of the gospel’s message and good news. God can do more with us than we imagine. God will not be limited to or dependent upon man and his capabilities. Contrary to the false doctrines of those such as Korihor, success and growth and reward are not based solely upon personal life management skills.” The Lord doesn’t really give a hoot about one’s personal strength. Even those with the metaphorical strength of a horse cannot do and achieve what those who learn to trust and utilize God’s mercy can do and achieve. Those who possess the false and proud imagination of a Korihor will find themselves “scattered.” Indeed, the Psalmist’s testimony stands firm,

“Let them praise the name of the LORD:
for his name alone is excellent....”

With such truth’s stirring her soul, Mary exclaims,

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”⁸

⁷ Psalm 147.¹⁰⁻¹¹

⁸ Luke 1.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷