

Joy Church
December 13, 2020

“Brought Down and Lifted Up”

When we experience a difficult situation especially in this time of pandemic and economic hardship, some of us may trust that God will help us through this challenging time. Others may be in despair if the circumstances seem hopeless or beyond our own strength. If discouraged, can we still have hope for something better to happen or hope in God? Can we still praise God in the midst of our struggle and despair and ask for change by the hand of God?

Mary’s situation

Mary, who finds out that she is pregnant without knowing a man, is definitely not in a circumstance to praise God for. In fact, she is in a tragic situation that could result in her being stoned to death according to the Laws of that time. Also, if the marriage engagement were broken off by Joseph, Mary would have lived a miserable life suffering religious condemnation and been destitute with no one to provide for her.

Instead of being sad or bitter, Mary rejoices and praises God who directs her life on this path. Although she is in a difficult situation with her pregnancy, she knew that she was being used as an instrument for the wonderful work of God by conceiving the Messiah who will bring about the kingdom of God. When the Messiah comes, he will give strength and hope to the people who are waiting for his reign and free them from their oppression.

I would like us to meditate on the meaning of the birth of the Messiah through Mary’s song focusing on verses 51 through 53.

First, Mary’s song praises God who is searching for the humble.

In our lesson passage today, we can see a woman named Mary who has no material wealth and is in a difficult circumstance, yet she praises God who caused her situation through the birth of the Messiah. Mary heard the prophecy from the angel that she would conceive a child, Jesus. When she heard the message, she was happy and visited her relative Elizabeth’s house and praised God there.

In verse 51, Mary says, “God has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.”

In order to understand who “the humble” are, we may need to pay attention to “the proud” in Mary’s song and observe what God has done to them and why. God “has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” Perhaps we can identify “the proud” with “the powerful” in verse 52 and “the rich” in verse 53. Reflecting back on the previous verse 50, the proud are those who do not fear God and the opposite of Mary singing that God’s “mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation.”

Again, Mary is mentioning the proud are those who do not experience hunger and affliction. These people only care about their own achievements, and they think of themselves as above others and refuse to bring God into their lives. They are the ones who oppress Israel, and they will experience the reversal of that power and wealth and status.

The Messiah will scatter the proud, and scattering in this context means the judgment of God as in the Old Testament.

Unlike the proud, Mary is not in a social and economic situation where she could be proud of her status at all. In the time of Mary's song, the oppressed are waiting for the Messiah who will bring justice and save them from their situation. We can see in verse 48, the expression "lowliness of his servant" is not only showing Mary's humility but also her low social status—that she does not actually have any privileges in society as the wife of a carpenter.

Mary is confident that the power shown in Exodus to the people, who groan under the proud and who long for God's salvation, will reappear through the birth of the Messiah. The Messiah will cause the dramatic reversal; the proud are scattered, the powerful are deposed, and the lowly are lifted up, and the hungry are fed while the rich are sent away empty.

God is looking for those who are humble—living according to the will of God and who fear him and long for God's salvation. The time of Jesus was the beginning of a very bad time for Jews historically and economically, and there were many people reverently waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The prophetess Anna and prophet Simeon are among those who are waiting for the Messiah as they praise God in Luke's gospel.

Even in a world of diminishing hope, there are people who are humbly and reverently waiting for God's kingdom to come through the Messiah. We can also be confident that God gives strength to such people today.

Let me share with you a story.

There was a man in a city who was once a salesman, and one day he became homeless due to the sudden bankruptcy of the company he worked for. He slept in his car for many days and went days without food. One day, he was hungry and went into a restaurant nearby. He ordered some food and ate, but he did not have any money to pay for the food. So, he pretended he lost his wallet and acted like he was searching for it. The owner of the restaurant approached the man and picked up a 20-dollar bill from the floor next to his table and gave it to him saying, "I think you dropped this money." The man thought it was the help of God, but actually the restaurant owner showed his generosity toward the man so he wouldn't be embarrassed.

After this incident, he promised himself he would help other people if his situation ever got better. Eventually, his life did get better, and he became a Santa on the street and gave gifts to those who had lost their jobs, families and property as he had. As he helped people, he had great joy in his heart and continued to recover and do well in life.

I think Jesus wants to see those who desire a better life gathering together to establish the kingdom of God on Earth. God is looking for humble people who have hearts like this man and like the restaurant owner.

Second, Mary's song praises God who is concerned for the lowly and the hungry.

In verses 52 and 53 say, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent away the rich empty."

In Jesus's sermon on the plain recorded in the gospel of Luke, wealth and power in that society rest with those who have vested rights and are in privileged classes. The poor and powerless were normally oppressed and despised by the rich and powerful during that time. Jesus preached to the poor and speaks of the coming woes for the rich in Luke 6:20-26.

Also, in the parable of the rich man in Luke's gospel chapter 12:13-21, it is clear that the rich man is self-centered and only interested in his own profit and driven by greed. The poor and the powerless were not recognized as deserving any consideration by the rich and powerful. In the time of Mary's song, the oppressed are anticipating the Messiah who will bring justice and save them from their situation.

However, we may consider that poor does not mean we do not have enough money to buy what we want. Being poor or living in poverty means not having the money to buy what we need. Mary's lowliness is about those people who have no money, no job, have no possessions, or the basic essentials for life. It is a constant state of having nothing and not by their choice.

What Mary was saying was God cared for the people who worked so hard day and night and lived poorly regardless of their effort, and who were abused and oppressed by those who had power and wealth. This is whom Mary preannounced God's mercy and grace upon and foretold those oppressors judged by God would have their status reversed.

Today, there are tent cities in many places on earth filled with thousands of hungry, sick, and frightened refugees. In most of these places, these people are unwanted and abused especially the women. There are levels of poverty that we would find difficult to comprehend living in America.

Some years ago, I briefly visited Nicaragua to help people in a certain city build a church, a clinic, and make chairs and benches for classrooms. We also helped the homeless by cutting their hair, washing their feet, and serving them food for thirteen days. Most of the places our group went had very limited water supplies and electricity. Food was a major problem for people living in poverty there. Many people were hungry and had nothing but the clothes on their back, and there was no place for them to go for help.

It was heart aching to watch them begging for food when we were eating baked chickens after work. People young and old surrounded the windows of the homeless center, where we were helping, and begged for the chicken bones after we ate. When I saw them begging for food to eat, I could not finish my meal and my tears were rolling down my face.

I prayed to God about how sorry I was for those hungry people who did not have what I had. I wanted to give my portion of food to them, but I was not allowed to do that. The least we could do was stop and go to where they could not see us eating. When I came back to America, I felt guilty sometimes eating nice meals, drinking clean water, and having a clean and safe place to live.

This short mission trip changed the hearts of our group, and we became actively involved in our local community charity programs and homeless soup kitchen.

People experience all kinds of needs in their lives, and in this world, there is a poverty of physical need, a poverty of emotional need, and a poverty of spiritual need. And this unjust world as it is will never fulfill our needs. Many people have little power on this earth to help anyone but themselves or their family and the poor do not even have that.

This help is what Mary believed that God would do in the magnificent work of Christ who would be born through her. And this is Mary's understanding of the birth of the Messiah, Jesus. Mary

trusted in God and welcomed what was happening and would happen to her and Israel and all the people who long for God.

The good news for the rich and powerful is that they have so much to share with those in need. When they enable better lives for the underprivileged, they experience the great joy and thanksgiving of sharing with the poor.

Mary's song is the good news that must be shared and lived and praised with thanksgiving to our loving and just God.