

# A Song of Hope in Despair

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you. Do please pick up the Bibles in front of you in the pews if you have one to hand. and turn with me to page 1026 in our Bibles. That's Luke chapter 1, and it should appear on the screen as well.

I'll start reading from verse 46. And Mary said, He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever.

Just as he promised our ancestors. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Amen. This is God's words to us. Well, good afternoon. I'm Ash. I'll be carrying on in our series looking at the songs in Luke's gospel, songs of Advent, as we anticipate celebrating the birth of Jesus.

I'll be referring a little earlier in this chapter from verses 26 when Gabriel first appears to Mary. But we'll be concentrating mostly on what's known as the Magnificat, that great song of Mary that we just read.

[ 2 : 05 ] But as we come to this passage, it's worth taking a moment to ask the question, what's going on in Mary's head in this whole episode?

It wasn't that long ago that she was just a young woman expecting to be married, and now she's had a visit from an angel, and she's pregnant with the Messiah.

It's a question that's going on in the Bible.

Because I don't think it's just skeptical professors who might think like this. I reckon there must surely be a number of people in this room who slightly balk at what's going on there.

And that's because it's easy to think of the incarnation in predominantly human terms. We know that God has something to do with it. But it's not simply that God was the Father.

[ 3 : 26 ] That's not what we're saying at Christmas. Not that this was a special baby because God made him. No, in fact, God is the active creator in every birth.

He's the agent of every pregnancy, every single one. The gift of new life is always a blessing from God. The miracle of the incarnation wasn't that God just stood in where a man would ordinarily be required.

The miracle was that, in fact, no man was needed. No seed was needed. And, in fact, much of the Christian hope is placed in this fact. Christians believe that sin, that instinct to reject God's rule, has been in every person since the first man, Adam, sinned.

But Jesus, crucially, is born from outside of Adam's line, straight from God into Mary's womb. This is how Jesus could, Christians talk in these terms, be the last Adam with an uncursed lineage, breaking the chain of inherited sin that's bound humanity since the fall.

That is to say that where Adam introduced sin so that everyone who came after him would be sinners, Jesus reintroduced righteousness so that all who followed him could be righteous.

[ 4 : 51 ] And if all of that sounds a bit dense and a bit weird right at the top of a sermon, then that's okay. There is an overwhelming amount of glorious theology in this passage that we can unpack this afternoon.

But what I want to see, firstly, is that Mary was, in fact, an active agent, a willing participant in God's redemptive plan. If you glance back to verse 30, the angel says, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.

Not that she had somehow earned it from God, but nor that God had just arbitrarily chosen her. Her faith given by God, her character, her posture before God mattered.

And note also, re what Alice Roberts was saying. The angel says, You will conceive and give birth to a son. That's future tense at that point.

Not something that's already happened without her knowledge, By the way, you've got a baby inside you. No, this is a blessing that is being promised to her. And how does she respond? Verse 38, I'm the Lord's servant.

[ 6 : 02 ] May your word to me be fulfilled. So as we come to this song from verse 46 onwards, let's not diminish Mary's agency. She found favor through faithfulness.

She was offered a blessing and grasped for it. She reached for it and embraced it. And now having conceived, her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God, her Savior.

Mary wasn't some hapless vehicle of the Messiah. She knows what God's doing. The song, we hear it most years, I think. The song asks, Mary, did you know?

And this song answers quite simply, Yes. Yes. Yes, Mary knew exactly what was going on. Mary knew exactly what kind of God she was dealing with.

And in this song, she tells us three things that she knows about how God works. Three reversals that show his character and that shape our Advent waiting.

[ 7 : 05 ] So first, you can see them on the screen. Mary knew that God reverses our status. He sees the lowly and scatters the proud. Second, Mary knew that God reverses our systems.

He brings down the mighty and lifts up the humble. And third, Mary knew that God reverses our expectations. He keeps his promises in surprising ways.

And each point, as we go through them, in true Advent style, will bring with it serious challenges and great comforts. So first, we'll look at verses 46 to 50 primarily.

God, sorry, Mary knew that God reverses our status. My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. Note what she says. He's been mindful of me.

[ 8 : 17 ] He's been mindful of the humble estate of his servant. It's not that God has kind of given a casual glance downwards and picked someone. He's regarded her with favor. He's looked intentionally upon her.

It's the same idea, if you know the story in Genesis 29, when Leah is also surprisingly blessed in a horrible situation, surprisingly blessed with a child, and says, it's because the Lord has seen me, he has seen my misery.

God sees what others overlook. And so think about Mary's situation in this story. She's young. She's female in a patriarchal society.

She's poor. She's unmarried and pregnant. She has no status. Yet God looks down. He looks upon her and made her the mother of the Messiah.

Mary doesn't say, he's looked on me and seen that I deserve this honor. No, verse 50, his mercy extends to those who fear him. This is sovereign grace. God's favor rests on those who fear him, not those who impress him.

[ 9 : 27 ] And this has always been how God has operated. Moses, the murderer and stutterer, becomes the leader and spokesman. David, the youngest shepherd boy, becomes the great ruler.

Hannah, some of you will know the story, barren and mocked for being so. Hannah is made a mother of high honor. And in fact, Mary is directly echoing Hannah's song from 1 Samuel 2.

Mary knew her Bible. She knew God's pattern. She knew what was going on. God delights in choosing the weak things of this world to shame the strong, as Paul would later write.

This is how God's power is displayed most clearly. Not through human strength, but through human weakness made strong by divine grace.

See what Mary says in verse 48. From now on, all generations will call me blessed. She's prophesying her own honor, but look at why.

[ 10 : 34 ] For the mighty one has done great things for me. Not about Mary's greatness. It's about God's mighty acts. Mary will be honored precisely because God chose to work through her humility.

Her blessings flowed from what God had done, not from who she is. And so this is grace, isn't it, on full display. She's not blessed because she's inherently special.

She's blessed because a mighty God looks down on her in his sovereign mercy and regarded her low estate and chose to work through her. And so here's the comfort for us as we start to look at this story.

You are seen. If you feel small right now in this Advent season, if you feel invisible, if you feel like your prayers are just bouncing back off the ceiling, God sees you and he hears you.

He has regarded our helpless estate as the hymn goes. He doesn't wait for you to make yourself impressive. He sees you in your weakness and that's exactly where his power works.

[ 11 : 45 ] But there's also challenge for us here, isn't there? If God takes us in our weakness and blesses us there, then don't try to be impressive.

Don't try to manufacture some kind of significance that God might take note. No, stand before God empty-handed like Mary and say, let it be to me according to your word.

Humble availability, radical dependence. This is what God honors here. He sees and lifts the lowly and Mary knew it. But she also knew what he did to the proud.

And this is our second point. Mary knew that God reverses our systems because here, verse 51 onwards, Mary's song changes its tune, so to speak. It takes on a slightly aggressive tone, doesn't it?

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones. Mary knows that just as God has always shown strength like he did with the Exodus when he freed his people from slavery in Egypt, that through this child, he is doing that on an altogether grander scale.

[ 13 : 07 ] Just as he delivered Israel from slavery and oppression, he will deliver all humanity from a far greater tyranny. In fact, the tyranny of sin and death.

That is the tyranny that means that we cannot help but sin. That means that each one of us has done harm constantly throughout our lives to ourselves, to those around us, to those we love the most, to the world that we live in.

And the death that comes hand in hand with that wickedness. Well, that's what God will scatter. But see how she says it. He has scattered.

He has brought down. He has filled. But this hasn't happened yet, has it? The child hasn't even been born. Mary's only recently discovered she's pregnant.

But Mary knows that God's promises are as good as done. Because God has done these things. He has been doing these things all throughout Israel's history.

[ 14 : 15 ] And will surely complete them through the life and death of this child that Mary now bears. So what exactly is God promising? Verses 52 and 53.

Thrones overturned. Hunger satisfied. The rich sent away empty. This isn't mere metaphor. Mary's talking about real power.

Political, economic, social. God is in the business of overturning unjust systems. Now, let's be clear. Mary isn't preaching political revolution in the sense that she's calling for peasant uprisings or some kind of violent overthrow.

But rather, she's declaring what God himself will surely accomplish through the Messiah. The kingdom of God operates on entirely different principles than earthly kingdoms.

Where worldly power grasps and hoards at what it has. The Lord's kingdom power gives and serves. Where earthly rulers dominate, the king of kings washes feet and dies for those who are against him.

[ 15 : 28 ] Think about how this dynamic played out in Jesus' ministry. If you know of any stories from the time when Jesus was going about preaching his message.

Who flocked to him? The poor. The sick. The sinners. The outcasts. The lepers. Those who are disregarded.

Those with no status. No power. No righteousness of their own. Who rejected him for the most part? The wealthy. The powerful.

The religious elite. Those who thought they had it all together. Who presumed on their own righteousness as we've been looking through Jonah. If you know of other Bible stories and think of them now.

Think Old Testament or New. Pharaoh. Nebuchadnezzar. Herod. Rome. All brought low eventually. The baby Mary is carrying will turn the world upside down.

[ 16 : 33 ] By which of course I mean the right way up. Not through military conquest but through sacrificial love. Not through political maneuvering but through dying on a cross.

This is the great reversal at the heart of the gospel. The great reversal at the heart of the gospel.

The great reversal at the heart of the gospel. The great reversal at the heart of the gospel. And this is going to make us uncomfortable if we're comfortable.

He has sent the rich away empty. That's a hard word to hear if we're among the rich. And by global standards most of us in this room are.

We have homes to live in. We can occasionally afford to heat them. We can fill our bellies. We have ready access to health care and education. By any historic or global measure we are among the blessed.

We have to be blessed with great wealth. And so what do we do with that? Do we feel guilty for having enough?

[ 17 : 35 ] Well no but we do need to examine our hearts. Are we clinging to our status? Our wealth? Our power? Are we presuming on God's blessing while turning a blind eye to injustice?

Are we rich towards ourselves but poor towards God? As Jesus warned later in Luke's gospel. The danger isn't in having resources.

The danger is trusting in them rather than in God. If you find yourself holding tightly to things. Then you're holding them as if they're your lifeline.

As if they're your salvation. They hold all things far looser than you hold Jesus Christ. When Jesus was grown later in this gospel.

Luke tells us of a rich young ruler who came to him. Who came to Jesus. Who claims to have kept all commandments. But when Jesus told him to sell everything and follow him.

[ 18 : 36 ] He went away sad. Why? Because he had a lot of stuff. And it turned out his money owned him more than he owned it. That's the danger that we're warned about here.

As we look at those who are mighty. Those who are rich and wealthy. Rather than those who are lowly at heart. But if you are among the hungry.

Literally or metaphorically. If you've been crushed. By powers. If you're outwith your control. If you're the victim of unjust systems.

If you are hungry. If your soul is downcast. If you're discouraged. Or perplexed. If you are struggling with life.

Then this is good news. God is on your side. And he is coming. Our poverty. Our weakness. Our need.

[ 19 : 32 ] All of these position us. To readily receive the riches offered. By the coming king. And that is what Advent is about. About waiting for that great.

Final reversal. Where Adam was cast. Out of Eden. Out of paradise. Jesus gathers us. To march back towards paradise.

Towards an eternity with him. And that journey back. Starts here in Bethlehem. Where the king of kings was born in a stable. It continues at the cross.

Where God's power was revealed. Through apparent weakness. And it will be completed upon Christ's. Wonderful return. When he comes to live with us once more. We have this journey summarized for us.

In Philippians didn't we? We saw how Jesus though. He was in the form of God. Emptied himself. Taking the form of a servant. Humbling himself. Into death on a cross.

[ 20 : 32 ] And then Paul says. Therefore God has highly exalted him. And given him the name above every name. That at the name of Jesus. Every knee should bow. So Mary knew.

How God works. Mary knew that God sees the lowly. And scatters the proud. But how did she know? Because finally. Mary knew. That God reverses the world's expectations.

She concludes. He has helped his servant Israel. Remembering to be merciful to Abraham. And his descendants forever. Just as he promised our ancestors.

Once again she points us back. She points us backwards. In order to guarantee. What is coming. He has helped.

Scripture speaks of God. Taking Israel by the hand. Throughout the Old Testament. It gives this picture. Of God helping Israel throughout. Of God being faithful.

[ 21 : 34 ] Of God doing. Exactly what he promised to do. Mary knew that. What God had promised Abraham. That through his seed. All nations would be blessed.

But she also knew that. 400 years. Had passed. Since the last prophet. And then at the end of that 400 years.

Here comes the angel Gabriel. In her living room. And now this young woman. Finds herself. Pregnant with that promise. Which has arrived. God doesn't.

Forget his promises. He doesn't change his mind. He doesn't fail to deliver. What he spoke to Abraham. Thousands of years before. He's now fulfilling in Mary's womb. Him. This should give us. Tremendous confidence. As we wait in our own. Kind of already. But not yet. Tension. Of knowing that we are saved.

[ 22 : 33 ] And yet finding us. Still here. Waiting for Jesus. And yet. He is coming. Look at the reversal. Of expectations.

From Mary's description. Of what this Messiah would do. It's not hard to see. Why so many. Expected a warrior king. Not someone born. Of humble Mary. But they got a baby. They expected political liberation. But got spiritual revolution. They surely expected.

To be led. By someone great. Not a baby born in a barn. And then humiliatingly crucified. Military might they wanted. They got sacrificial love.

Think about how wrong. So many got it. And surely you and I. Would have been the same. The scribes and Pharisees. Who had studied scripture.

[ 23 : 29 ] Their whole lives. When the Messiah came. They missed him. Because they were looking for someone. Who would validate their systems. Confirm their righteousness.

Overthrow Rome. Hopefully. Instead they got someone. Who ate with tax collectors. And sinners. Who challenged their hypocrisy. And who talked about a kingdom. That was not of this world. It is a hard thing to grasp. It is very upside down. According to our thinking. Even the disciples. Consistently misunderstood this. Asking for seats of honor.

At Jesus' table. In his kingdom. Even rebuking Jesus. When he talked about dying. Right up to his ascension. They are saying. Lord. Will you restore the kingdom. To Israel.

They kept expecting. The wrong thing. The small thing. But Mary. It seemed. Knew. She knew God.

[ 24 : 27 ] She knew how far. This reversal. Was going to reach. As far as the curse is found. As the great carol goes. Not to restore. The small kingdom of Israel. But to restore.

Humanity. She knows. She's quoting Hannah. Echoing Psalms. Drawing on Genesis. She knew God's character. She knew what he'd done.

She knew that he was merciful. And faithful. She knew his pattern. Of choosing weakness. Exalting humility. She knew that God's ways.

Are not our ways. And his thoughts. Are not our thoughts. So she's not surprised. When God works. Through surprising means. Here she simply. Worships.

And that's where we find ourselves. This advent. Faced with the news. Of something great. That will surely come. Yet hasn't.

[ 25 : 22 ] Materialized. In front of us. Living between that now. And not yet. The reversals. Have begun. But aren't complete. Jesus has come.

But not returned. We've seen God begin. To fulfill his promises. We know he'll finish. What he started. And yet. We wait.

But we do know. Don't we? That God. Keeps his promises. Every single one. And Mary shows us. How to wait. Wait with humility. With confidence.

With worship. And with joy. Not anxiously. Wringing our hands. Wondering if God will actually come through for us. No. How should we wait?

Well. What are you waiting for? This advent. As you wait to celebrate Christmas. But as in your mind. You wait for the return of Jesus.

[ 26 : 22 ] You're waiting for healing. For justice. Reconciliation. Hope. Peace. Restoration. All these things.

Mary knew what she was waiting for. She knew God sees the lowly. Including her. Including us.

She knew God scatters the proud. Reverses every system. She knew God remembers mercy.

And keeps every promise. And she knew that the baby she was carrying. Would accomplish all of this. In advent. We wait. Like Mary. Not passively.

But actively trusting. Not proudly. But humbly available. Not anxiously. But in worship. This message brings us great challenge. But great comfort.

As we close. Let's think about some of these challenges and comforts. To challenge.

[ 27 : 20 ] We should examine our status. Is that something that we cling to? Or hold with an open palm? Are you trying to build a name for yourself?

Or are you content to be seen by God alone? Are you trusting in your own righteousness? Your church attendance. Your theological knowledge. Whatever it is. Or are you trusting in Christ alone?

Examine your systems. Are you benefiting from injustice? Are you working for God's reversals? Or just enjoying your privilege? Are you generous with what God's given you?

Or are you hoarding it? Are you the rich who will be sent away empty? Or are you learning to hold what you've been blessed with? With open arms. Open hands, sorry.

Examine your expectations. Are we demanding that God works in our way? Are we open to his reversals?

[ 28 : 20 ] Are we willing to let God surprise us even when his ways don't quite match how we want him to be acting? But now the comfort. If you're small, he sees you.

He has been mindful of the humble estate of his servants. Our insignificance in the world's eyes does not matter. God sees you. God regards you. And he will work through your weakness.

If you're crushed, he is coming. The mighty will be brought down. The hungry will be filled. Justice will roll like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The kingdom is coming. And every wrong will be made right when it does. If you are waiting, he is faithful. He's helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful.

The same God who kept his promise to Abraham keeps his promise to you and to me. What he's spoken, he will accomplish. Back quickly in our minds to Genesis 3.

[ 29 : 24 ] In the same breath that God cast man out of the garden, God promised, And I will put enmity between you and the woman, to the serpent, he says.

And between your offspring and hers, he will crush your head and you will strike his heel. That promise made in the garden was fulfilled in Mary's womb. The baby she carried would undo everything that had been done in that horrible chapter in Genesis.

Sin, death, curse. All defeated by a baby born in Bethlehem. Mary knew who she was carrying. She knew what God was doing. And she responded with worship.

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in my Savior. My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Shall we respond in kind now as we pray before we sing our final hymn? Lord God, we thank you for this message.

[ 30 : 32 ] We thank you for this song. We thank you that you see the lowly, that when we were helpless and without strength, when we were without any righteousness of our own, Christ died for us.

Thank you that this baby born in Bethlehem has crushed the serpent's head, broken the curse of sin and death, and accomplished all that you promised. Thank you that through his perfect life, his atoning death, and his glorious resurrection, we who are far off are now brought near.

And so, Lord, help us to wait this advent as Mary did, not anxiously but in worship. Where we feel small and invisible, Lord, help us to know that you see us.

Where we are crushed by injustice. Strengthen our hope in your coming kingdom. Where we're still waiting for your promises to be fulfilled. Would you deepen our confidence that you are indeed faithful?

Through Christ Jesus, our Lord, who came once as a baby and will come again as king. Amen.