

Belong to the People of Promise, Part 1

Luke 1:54-55

Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Luke's Gospel and we are in Luke 1:46-55, the Song of Mary. Follow along as I read Luke 1:46 and following, "And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 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; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.'"

As we've said before, that passage right there is the perfect Biblical illustration of a spiritual song. Mary's Song

is her response for what God had done for her, to her. It's full of her emotion. We've talked about that. It's full of her rejoicing, full of her gratitude for God's mercy and grace. But if you'll notice, the occasion that prompted the singing of this song, which is none other than the conception of the Son of God in Mary's virgin womb, where is that? Isn't it interesting that Mary says nothing explicit about the specific personal blessing she received? Isn't that fascinating?

Notice in verse 55, though, it's not until the final line of the final stanza that she even alludes to the particular reason for her song. It's a little subtle, maybe hidden in the context of God's mercy to Israel. But when Mary finally refers to the baby that's growing in her womb, it's in this way, "To Abraham and to his offspring," offspring, "forever." The offspring of Abraham, literally to his seed, it's talking about the seed of Abraham. That is a clear reference in a Jewish mind, clear reference to the Messiah.

The coming of Messiah fulfilled the promise God made to Abraham in the Abrahamic covenant. All the promises God made to Abraham were tied to the promise of the seed. And so as Mary ends her song, it is really on a triumphant note of the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan. His entire redemptive plan

is wrapped up in that one child. These are truths that really surpass Mary personally, and she wonders, she is amazed that she's been given an integral part of what God is doing on earth.

But, just push pause for a moment. Think about this because this is what we need to learn as well. Notice here Mary's sense of self as a distinct, unique personality standing on her own, autonomous and independent. That sense of self, so common among us Americans, is foreign to Mary. I'm not saying that she doesn't think of herself as an individual human being. Obviously, she, she does. We've, we've already pointed out how this is Mary's Song. She uses personal, pror, pronouns to refer to herself. She says, my soul, my spirit, God, my Savior. But the emphasis throughout on herself, the emphasis is muted. And especially so, as she starts referring to herself in the third person there in verse 48, "God has looked on the humble estate of his servant," literally, his slave.

When she sees herself having a role in this whole redemptive plan, it's not to acknowledge her independence, but her ownership, her total dependence. And from then on in this song, we hear a lot about God, a lot about others. She counts herself among the people with whom she identifies. In fact, if you just flow through the, through the song, the song there, she

talks about all generations. She talks about those who fear him. She talks about generation to generation, those of humble estate, those who hunger, his servant Israel, our fathers, Abraham and his offspring. Those people are her people.

Her identity is only significant as one member among the rest of those. She rejoices in being owned by God her master, and she rejoices not in her, in her individualism, she rejoices in her belonging. Mary's sense of identity is found in her corporate identity, who she is as an individual, far less important to her than who she belongs to, than the people she belongs to. Mary belongs to God. Mary belongs to the historic line of faithful Israel. She is, she's numbered among those humble souls who fear the Lord, who hope in his promises, and that sense of identity was enough and everything she needed to satisfy every desire she had for significance and meaning in her life.

Listen, when we view ourselves like Mary did, when we view ourselves in light of God and who he is, in light of God's people, in light of what God is doing from Genesis to Revelation, you know what? It solves everything for us. Every trial and triumph of life is interpreted through that grid, and everything that happens to us, whether it's a difficulty or a

challenge we're facing, or whether it's something we're really happy about, it's all part of God's unfolding plan that he determined from the beginning and will bring to its final consummation in the very end. And you know what? When we have that kind of confidence, when we have that kind of view of God, nothing can shake us, nothing can rock our world. Everything is interpreted through that grid. And we have an anchor that holds our soul fast.

But that's not a very American way of thinking, is it? As a culture, we celebrate individuals, not groups. We follow with interest the lives of celebrated personalities, entertainers, musicians, athletes. Americans like to think of individual achievement, not corporate identity. In fact, we lose interest, our eyes glaze over a bit, we even regard with some level of suspicion the larger groups, the corporations, right? That sense of individual identity, that sense of individualism is assumed in our culture. It's assumed in the fabric of our DNA as a society. It's even embraced. It's celebrated, and it's also celebrated in the evangelical churches all over the country.

It entered the church not through Scripture, but through American cultural and political ideals. Our political system of representative democracy, power to the people, that's how many

Christians think about the church. Every individual member has his say. Every individual member has a vote. Every individual member's interest needs to be satisfied, even catered to. Those cultural sympathies may be part of our American DNA, but they're not a part of our heavenly DNA. That mentality is precisely what we need to unlearn as Bible believing Christians. We are learning a new culture, a culture that is revealed to us from heaven given to us in this book we received from God. And as we grow in the knowledge of the truth, our individual and our corporate identities come into proper alignment, conforming to God's design, conforming to his desire, his intention, his plan.

And once again, we just can't help but recognize Mary's, how she's exemplary in modeling for us the right mentality. This is how believers ought to think. She's just a young girl. So, it doesn't matter about our age, it doesn't matter if we're old, we're young, or anywhere in between; doesn't matter our life circumstance, we need to think like Mary. Her explicit example showing us how we need to glorify and rejoice in God is really an implicit lesson on how we need to think about ourselves. She was understandably overjoyed at what God had done for her personally as an individual, obviously. But her individual joys

were somewhat eclipsed by what God was accomplishing for his glory, what he was doing for his entire people. She was not an isolated unit; she was part of a whole fabric of God's design.

What's made our task more difficult, our task of unlearning our American individualism, is that our emphasis on the self has become so deeply ingrained in our thinking, even in the church, we've learned that we are to be catered to, appealed to, satisfied. It's a hard mentality to overcome, especially when we've spent half a century believing in the sovereignty of the self.

Let me show just one example of what I mean. There are many examples of this, but I just want to show you one. Back in the early 1900s, there was a man named Jarrell Waskom Pickett. J. Waskom Pickett. Mr. Pickett went to India and he was sent there as a Methodist missionary in 1910, and he soon became interested in the sociology of church growth. He started studying conversion rates and church growth rates among castes and social groups in certain parts of India. He made observations about common traits among groups and groups that seemed to have higher conversion rates than others, higher rates of church growth and according to Pickett's observations, the Indian people, they liked to remain within their own caste.

You understand the Indian caste system, how you didn't go above and below. You had the Brahman caste and you had all these others castes in descending order below it down to the beggar caste and everything else. Indians liked to stay within their caste, within their own social strata, when they converted to Christianity. They wanted to remain within those groups, maintain those castes even in the church. It's kind of like just accepting cliquishness and just making a place for it.

So Pickett published his findings in a 1933 book called *Christian Mass Movements in India*. That book had a profound influence on another missionary also working in India. A man named Donald McGavran was making some of the same observations about the growth of Christianity in India, and Pickett's book was a catalyst for his thinking. In fact, he said, Quote, "I lit my candle at Pickett's fire." McGavran continued to study the causes and barriers to church growth, but he took Pickett's work even further. He wanted to identify principles that, get this, could guarantee higher rates of individual conversion and higher rates of church growth. He was looking for something that was reproducible, guaranteeing conversions, guaranteeing rates of church growth.



The Bible tells us those things belong firmly in the domain of the sovereign will of God. But McGavran's theology emphasized human choice, not divine sovereignty. McGavran's theology emphasized man's will. Man, not God, was the determining factor in conversion and church growth. So, in McGavran's mind, if you could find principles that would influence man's will, if you could incorporate those principles and if they're reproducible, well, this would become a catalyst for an unprecedented spiritual revival. His principles held forth the promise of mass conversions and massive churches. His key principle, McGavran's key principle of, of church growth and what earned him the title, The Father of the Church Growth Movement, was a principle he called The Homogenous Growth Unit Principle. The Homogenous Growth Unit Principle, that is the heart of the church growth movement. That's what has come to shape the face of evangelical churches all across America and also around the world.

Here's what it means: A homogenous unit is just a fancy way of referring to a group within a society in which the members share common characteristics. Okay? So it's just a group that likes to be together or is defined the same way because they do whatever they do together. So you could say cowboys are a homogenous unit; athletes, homogenous unit; College students are a homogenous unit, so on and so forth. Basically, the Homogenous

Growth Unit Principle says, “People,” and this is his quote, “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.” I’ll read that once again. “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.”

So, from that thinking, McGavran was trying to find a way for people to become Christians without changing, without any change. If you want to reach cowboys, package the Gospel in cowboy terms. If you want to reach athletes, package the Gospel in athletic terms using athletic metaphors and analogies. If you want to reach college students, well, appeal to them as students. And on and on it goes.

When McGavran brought the Homogenous Growth Unit Principle back to America, you can understand, it was an easy sell. Americans were used to being marketed to, and the atmosphere of American theology was already permeated by individual choice, personal preference, personal autonomy, and the sovereignty of self. McGavran’s principle didn’t smell any different to Americans than the air they were already breathing. Don’t force people to cross any barriers, keep them as comfortable and as untroubled as possible, and you’ll see better results in

evangelism and church grown. And you know? That worked. People flocked to churches operating by that principle.

Father McGavran produced his offspring, and that offspring is called the Seeker Movement. We've all seen the results. It has taken deep root all throughout our country and even around the world. That's why there are so many ministries, outreaches, support groups for every kind of interest, every kind of life situation. Almost every circumstance you can think about has a group for it. By appealing to individual self-identity, people remain fixed in their old identity rather than embracing a new identity in Christ. You see how problematic that is? For these people, Christianity is about individual self-expression rather than learning a new culture and belonging to a new people. For them it's about continuing to worship the God of self rather than worshipping the God who created them and called them to be a part of a new people.

Well, this thing spread far and wide. McGavran resigned his missionary post in 1961, and he found the Institute for Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon. Four years later, in 1965, he moved his institute to the campus of Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission in Pasadena, California. Together with C. Peter Wagoner, Ralph Winter, and other popular missiologists,

McGavran taught ministerial students the foundational principles of church growth theory, and those early students put that principle into effect in their churches. They saw massive growth, massive numbers. The most successful among them became evangelists for the Church Growth Movement, the seeker-sensitive movement. You know who they are; you know their names because their books have lined the shelves in Christian bookstores for decades.

Struggling pastors not sure about how to grow a church grabbed onto those books like a lifeline. And they imbibed those teachings and they tried to put them into effect in their own churches. Yes, it worked, more people coming, bigger churches. But, listen, it was a Trojan horse. What looked like a gift actually carried a massive plague, the plague of self-worship, the plague of personal autonomy and those churches are now filled with people who've been taught, it's all about you, it's all about you.

You see how far we've drifted from the humble simplicity, the unassuming piety of this young girl, Mary? What we read in this song, the deepest, clearest, most honest expression of Mary's heart it's really pretty foreign to the American way of thinking. Isn't it? Listen, I'm a part of this. Like you, I grew

up in this, and I'm trying to pull my way out. We need to do that together.

When is the last time you saw a Christian like Mary, someone who cares nothing about personal preference, who cares nothing about individual self-expression, someone whose identity is completely and totally in God, someone considering herself in the relationship of slave to master? When was the last time you heard of a Christian who is rejoicing in God, but not at all in connection with some personal, individual blessing or triumph, but rather in connection with what God is accomplishing among his people throughout all history and what he's going to do in the future? When was the last time you met a person like that? When you do meet people like that, don't they make you feel a bit uncomfortable? They don't fit in our churches.

Mary's remarkable, isn't she? But on, on another sense, she shouldn't be remarkable, she should not be remarkable at all. This should be the mentality of every single believer, caring more about God and his interests, quick, racing to defer to others in their preferences, more interested in how God is fulfilling his promises to Abraham and to his offspring forever. Far more interested in that than how God finds, for us, a parking space at the grocery store and how he makes our lives

just a little bit easier, a little bit more tolerable, a little bit easier to cope with.

Folks, like Mary, we need to think of ourselves as those who belong to something greater than ourselves. Folks, that's escape. That is freedom. That is true joy when we find God greater than ourselves, when we find all our identity wrapped up in him and him alone, wrapped up in people who are like him, who we can see from the beginning of time all the way through the history of the Bible; we see them now, we identify them this way. These are our people. By God's grace, we've been grafted into these people. We've been grafted into a new people. We now belong to the people of promise. And what is most important is not us. What's most important is the promise of God and what that promise teaches us about the God who gave it.

As we've already seen, Mary has rejoiced in God as her sovereign Lord, as her merciful savior. Mary has learned about God. She's experienced his nature first-hand. He is a mighty, holy, merciful God. She knows God by observing his ways, by how he opposes the proud and he gives grace to the humble. That's all in this song. God frustrates the arrogant among men. He subverts the ambitions of the powerful. He disappoints the expectations of the rich, and for Mary that is a cause of great

rejoicing since she's not proud, she's not mighty, she's not wealthy. Mary counts herself among the humble, the hungry.

She considers herself content to be among those who are lowly before God. She hungers and thirsts for righteousness that she herself does not possess. Those are her people, a people totally and utterly dependent on God. And as she says in verse 50, "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." It was enough for her to be counted among those people. The ground of her hope for the future was laid down way in the past when God spoke. Mary looked forward in confidence because she knew her history. She knew the history of who God was, what he'd said, and how he'd dealt with his people. She knew that history, so she felt and held deep convictions about her place among God's chosen people and about God's plan for the future.

The commentator Joel Green gets it exactly right when he says this, quote, "All these operative words in verses 54 to 55, servant, remember, mercy, promise, ancestors, and Abraham, point backward to God's history with Israel to their election, to their covenantal relationship. In fact, these terms and especially mercy, point even further back to the nature of God himself. The God Mary praises is the covenant-making God, the

God who acts out of his own self-giving nature to embrace men and women in relationship. God remembers and acts.” End Quote.

Mary belongs to this people, the people of the promise. The people who build their hope on whatever comes out of God’s mouth. In fact, the central line in the final stanza of Mary’s song is in verses 54 and 55, It’s that line right there, verse 55, “As he spoke to our fathers.” The emphasis is on God’s spoken word, which comes to Mary and to us as a promise. It’s a promise. The word of God, the promise of God, what God has said, knowing his word from the past gives us a deep conviction, a confident hope about the future. It gives us a grid through which to think about our entire life, every challenge, every frustration, everything that can be the, the provocation for impatience, sadness, trouble. It’s all wrapped up right here, this kind of thinking.

If our eyes are on ourselves and on our individual situations, if our identities are completely self-centered, if, if we’re completely wrapped up in self-focus, in personal preference, in individual self-expression, you know what? We are setting ourselves up for all kinds of disappointment. We’re setting ourselves up for a lack of contentment. Discontentment, it gives birth to other temptations, doesn’t it?



# PILLAR OF —TRUTH—



Like grumbling and complaining, as we read from Psalm 90, God judges that. God's not happy with grumbling and complaining. He judges it. If our eyes, though, are on God's historic dealings with his people and his future plans for his people, then our individual concerns are eclipsed by God's greater work. We belong to a greater story something way bigger than ourselves. We belong to a people of promise, and our hope is in a God who always keeps his promises.