

Luke Chapter 1 v 39 - 56

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Welcome to all of you. Good to welcome friends, old and new, and trust that together as we draw near to God we might know his help, his encouragement, his blessing as well.

On the screen from behind me is Luke chapter 1, part of the song of praise of Mary. And she says, my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. I hope that this morning as we come to worship there is that sense of joy and rejoicing in the Lord God as our Saviour and that our souls are engaged in that worship, not just our lips, not just even our lives but our very soul itself, that we might worship God in spirit and in truth. And our first hymn is a paraphrase of that very Song of Mary, 35 in our hymn books. Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord, our numbered blessings. Give my spirit voice. Let's stand and sing number 35.

Please do be seated. Let's come to our God in prayer together. Let's continue to worship him as we pray.

Everything within us, O Lord our God, wants to speak out your praise. Every part of our being you've created for that very purpose and reason, that we might glorify you, that we might delight in you and rejoice in you, that we might find you to be the joy of our lives. We thank you, O Lord our God, that this was not always the case. Once we were ignorant of you, once we did know, we knew nothing of your goodness. Once we were, Lord, wandering as it were blindly through life, thinking that we were the center of the universe, not realizing, O Lord, that you are the very center of all things, the fountain, the giver of all good gifts. O Lord, we thank you that though we were once lost, you found us. Once we were blind but you gave us sight. Once we were dead towards you, cut off from you, yet you gave us life. And we thank you again that this is all because of your son, the Lord Jesus

Christ. All because of that event that we are drawing near to celebrate, his coming into this world. For again, even in that advent, even in that coming, Lord Jesus, we have the evidence, the proof that you are the God who takes the initiative. You are the God who acts. You are the God who works. Lord, you didn't leave humanity in the quagmire and the bog of our own foolishness and sin. You came and stepped down to where we are. You could have left us all alone. You could have left us just to carry on as we were. But Lord, you came to us. You came to us in Jesus and you come to us again.

[3 : 12] You come to us again every time that we meet together, every time that we stop and think about you. Lord, you're there. You're always speaking to us through the creation that you've made, through the kindness, through the love, through your people. Lord, you're always calling, calling us to come to you, calling us to come away from that which is harmful and destructive and deathly.

You're always calling us to come to you, the God who gives all good gifts, the God who saves, the God who rescues, the God who transforms and changes. And oh Lord, as you came into the world in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and transform the world. So Lord, you are the God who wants to step into our lives and transform us. We thank you for this opportunity we have this morning to be here with you because you are here, not because of this building, not because we're in a church, but because you're the

God who is always present where your people meet. And we thank you that you're here to speak to us. Give us ears to hear. You're here to show yourself to us that we might know you. Give us eyes to see. You're here, oh Lord, to give to us forgiveness and peace and salvation. Lord, give us faith, open-heartedness grace to receive. Lord, we thank you that you are here to bless. We pray that Lord as we come to sing these hymns, as we read your word, as we think about it. Lord, in this time, so Lord, we ask that you would do each one of us good as that is your great desire. And that from our lives, from our hearts, from all that we are, we might indeed worship and adore you and praise

you. Not just in this brief time, but Lord, by our lives, live out the power, live out the grace and the love of God that you've poured into our hearts. So Lord, be with us now and bless this time, we pray, for we bring to you our requests and prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

As you might expect, thinking about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, this passage is pointing us again to him and who he is and what he came to do and the events surrounding this amazing entrance into the world.

Verse 39. At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zachariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice, she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear.

[6 : 27] But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her. And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he's been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He's scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but he's lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

[7 : 34] 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. Well, if you'd like to open your Bibles to Luke and chapter 1, to where we read just a little while ago, we're going to be thinking about that passage, and particularly that song of Mary, that incredible song of praise that she lifts to God, and to worship him.

There's one question, no doubt, on everybody's lips. Whenever you meet anybody in the street, whenever you speak to anybody on the phone, inevitably, the first question will be, are you ready for Christmas?

Isn't it? That's all they say. Are you ready for Christmas? That's all we can talk about. It's not that or the weather. Are you ready for Christmas? Have you done all your Christmas shopping? Have you bought all your presents? Et cetera, et cetera.

But what motivates us to give the gifts that we give at Christmas? What do we hope to achieve by these presents that we purchase for people?

[8 : 55] Well, of course, a lot can depend upon the person that you're buying the gift for. If you're buying a gift for your boss at work, it's with the hope that you might get a pay rise in the new year.

If it's for a work colleague, it's a present you've bought because you had to, because you're in the secret Santa drawer. And even if you didn't necessarily like them, you had to buy them something. If it's for your in-laws, of course, then it's with the hope that you might get a mention in the will. Now, I'm being very cynical, aren't I? No, there's one reason, isn't there?

The reason we buy gifts for the people that we buy gifts for is because we want to make them happy. We hope that that gift will add a bit of cheer to them or make them feel a sense of joy, a sense of happiness.

It's that in mind that we get the gift. Happiness. A little bit of happiness. Now, in that reading that we read from verse 39 of Luke 1, there's a word that appears four times, which has, in one sense, in essence, the word happiness.

[10 : 09] It's the word blessed. Twice it appears in verse 42, as Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks of the blessing upon Mary and the blessing upon the child that she's to bear.

And then verse 45 again, Elizabeth, blessed is she who's believed. And then Mary herself acknowledges this blessing when she speaks about verse 48, from now on, all generations, all people will call me blessed.

When we think of the word blessed, it immediately brings about a sort of religious thought, a thought about God, doesn't it? God bless you. Even now, of course, when somebody sneezes in

our proximity, even if they're a stranger in the street, you might, you'll tend to say, bless you, or God bless you.

Actually, we do it unthinkingly, but in reality, it comes from a prayer. It's us praying for them, praying that that cold, that sneeze, or whatever, won't get any worse, it won't become fatal.

That's really the sense of it. But God bless you. As Mary is meeting with her cousin Elizabeth, she now has received that incredible announcement from God via the angel that she is to bear a child, though she's a virgin, she's unmarried, she's had no sexual relations at all, yet she will bear this incredible child who will be the Son of God.

[11 : 35] She goes to see Elizabeth, and Elizabeth doesn't ask God to bless her. She sort of declares that she's already blessed.

Blessed are you. You're already blessed, and blessed is the child you'll bear. Already you're blessed. And you're particularly blessed, verse 45, because you believed.

You believe what God has said is true, and he's going to keep his promises. And in this incredible psalm, really, these words of Mary are very much, they're like a psalm of the Old Testament, you know, of David or one of the others.

It's this song of joy and rejoicing, isn't it? My soul glorifies the Lord. My heart rejoices in God.

There's an overflowing sense in which she's absolutely delighted.

And why is she delighted? Why is she so happy? Because she's been blessed from now on. All generations will recognize, will see that I've been blessed. The blessing of God is the most glorious, the most precious, the most wonderful possession that any person can ever have or experience.

[12 : 47] were we to combine all the possible joys of life, all the experiences, all the best bits, as it were, and bundle them all together, and box them all up, all the really great parts of our lives, and to experience them all in one go, they would not come anywhere near what it means to be blessed by God.

They wouldn't come close. To receive God's blessing in a person's life is exceptional, and it has no equal.

And as Mary speaks and praises God, and speaks about the blessing that she's received from God, and the reality of what it means to know that blessing, then we begin to understand what it means for us to be blessed by God.

Because I need to ask you, I need to put it to you, do you know the blessing of God? Have you enjoyed the blessing of God? Have you experienced it? Or is it something completely alien to you? Say, blessed by God.

And we'll think about that in a moment, but I want to draw something else out here, because ultimately, the blessing that she's received leads her to think about God's promises.

[14 : 11] God's faithful promises. Particularly, do you notice at the end that she's talked about all the things that God does, and all that he's done. She sums them up by saying, in one sense, this is what God has done by remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

What's happening, we've seen this all the way through the beginning of Luke, haven't we? What is happening is God keeping his promises. Jesus coming into the world was not just sort of a last-ditch attempt to rescue a world which is in crisis.

It was a plan that God had from before the world was made, a plan that he had promised to send his son, the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior into the world, and he's now fulfilling his promises.

He's now bringing it all together. He's causing it to happen. But he has so many promises that he's given, and the blessing of God comes as a promise, or the fulfillment of a promise made to Abraham and his descendants.

What is she talking about? What is the promise that God has made that is being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ, his son, and that brings blessing to Mary, and in fact, ultimately to all?

[15 : 33] Now Abraham, as you know, was somebody who received lots of promises from God. Do you know anything of your Bible at all? He had promises concerning the number of his descendants, of his children.

Here he was when he received these promises of an elderly man with an elderly wife who'd never had any children, and God said, look at the stars in the sky. Your children will outnumber the stars in the sky.

And he believed God's promise, though he hadn't even won. But God also made promises to him concerning the promised land. He said, you're going to come back. Your people are going to come back. Your descendants come back, and this is going to be their land, which they're going to enjoy and owe my blessing upon it. When he didn't even own a house. He just lived in a tent. Was it that promise? Was it those promises that Mary has in mind? Is it those promises? No, I don't believe it was.

[16 : 32] Because this particular promise that she has in mind, I believe, contains God's blessing. A blessing which is now coming into reality.

The promise that God gave to Abraham is one of the promises he gave right at the very beginning when he met with Abraham. Abraham didn't know God. He was a stranger to God. In fact, we're told that he used to worship other gods like everybody else did.

Had their own family gods in that sense. But God came into his life. God came and spoke to him when he was in Ur of the Chaldees and said to him, Abraham, I want you to go to where I'm sending you.

God came and instigated in his life and he promised to bless him. But more than that, he gave him an incredible promise in Genesis and chapter 12 where he promised to make him a blessing.

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. And then God makes that promise a bit more clearer later on in Genesis 22 when again he speaks to Abraham, through your offspring all nations on the earth will be blessed.

[17 : 47] It's a promise that he repeats to Isaac, Abraham's son, who again himself was to be the father of many peoples. He makes the same promise.

Through your offspring, Isaac, all nations on the earth will be blessed. What does that mean? Does God mean in that promise that all these children, all these descendants you're going to have, they're going to be a great blessing to the world.

They're all going to bring something positive to the world. No, that isn't what God meant. The Apostle Paul makes it very clear that this promise is about one offspring, one person, one descendant of Abraham who would come and through him blessing would come to every tribe and tongue and nation and people on earth.

Paul, when writing to the Christians in Galatia, he says this, the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Bible doesn't say, or Scripture doesn't say, and to seeds as to many people, but to your seed, meaning one person who is Christ.

And he's quite right because the word offspring, that's there that God uses, of course it can mean many, but it can also mean one. And it actually is the word seed, to your seed.

[19 : 12] It's singular, not plural. It is through one descendant of Abraham, this child to be born to Mary, a descendant of Abraham, that God is going to pour out his blessing upon every nation and people on earth.

That's the message that the apostles took with them as they went to preach the good news. After Jesus' death, his resurrection, the giving of the Holy Spirit and Pentecost, they began to preach good news, and their good news to the people was like this.

Acts chapter 3, God said to Abraham, through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed. When God raised up his servant, Jesus, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.

The message of the gospel is that God's blessing given to Abraham has come about. God's blessing to all people is a reality now through the life of Jesus.

So Mary's rejoicing. God, you've kept your promise, not just your promise to me, but your promise to the world, your promise to Abraham, your promise that through him, this long-awaited child, this long-awaited offspring, blessing would come.

[20 : 40] But what does it mean to be blessed of God? What is the blessing that God promises to all people? Well, surely it's what Mary sings about here in this wonderful psalm, this joy-filled, this exciting, this bursting-out song of praise to God.

What has God done? Well, first of all, he's done great things for me. There, verse 49, for the mighty one has done great things for me. It's very personal.

Mary has been blessed personally. Yes, the promise is through Abraham that there will be one who will come who will be a blessing to all nations, but it has to be personal.

It has to be me. It has to be I. It has to be something that we engage with ourselves. It's not just some general thing. What has God done that's so great for Mary?

Well, he's done this amazing and mighty thing. He's given her a child when she's a virgin. There isn't much greater than the virgin birth, is there?

[21 : 58] There isn't anything pretty more amazing, powerful, awesome, than the virgin birth, than the actual person of God entering into the womb of this woman.

God has given her a child who is, we're told, God the Son. Verse 32, he will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. How will this happen?

The Holy Spirit will come on you, verse 35, for the power of the Most High will overshadow you, so the Holy One to be born will be the Son of God. This miracle of God's power and might is so baffling to our understanding that many people mock it, ridicule it, deny it.

It can't happen, it's impossible. Well, yes, it's impossible for us, it's not impossible for God, God who created the whole universe and everything in it, God who sustains the stars and the planets in their place, this God who is so awesome, it's not hard for him, because he's the mighty one, or as we know him better, the almighty one.

What does it mean if you've got all power, almighty? It means you can do anything and everything that you want. It's only difficult, it's only impossible, it's only hard, if the view of God we have is of a small God.

[23 : 33] If our God is a feeble, ineffectual, impotent God, then of course he can't do it, he can't bring a child to be born of a virgin, but if he's a big God, if he's the great God, the mighty God, as Mary views him, as all Christians view him, then of course it's not too hard.

He has done mighty things, he does do mighty things, he will do mighty things. The first blessing in that sense of God is that he does mighty things.

And anyone who's a Christian here this morning is able to say, God's done mighty things for me, he's done amazing things for me, he's done incredible things for me, things that I could never imagine that could be done, things that just blow my mind, never mind your mind.

great. You just wouldn't credit what God has done for me. And it's got to be him, because I know it's nothing of myself.

But then she speaks about God doing merciful things, mentions it twice, verse 50, his mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation, and later on, verse 54, he has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful.

[24 : 53] The mighty acts of God are merciful acts of God. We don't use the word mercy so much nowadays, as we perhaps would have done in the past, but we know what mercy means.

Mercy is to show compassion or kindness to those who are in need. It means to give help to people who are in particular difficulty or loss. God is to show this God who has all might and all power and can do whatever he wants, uses his power mercifully.

Uses his power to bring blessing, to do good, to show kindness, to show care to those in need. Now we know the saying, don't we?

Power corrupts, an absolute power corrupts absolutely. We know and we see again and again men and women of power and of might, whether it be financial or whether it be in government, using that power and that might to extend their own borders, to make themselves richer, they use it for their own good.

Not all, but many. But here's the God of all might and all power who can do whatever he chooses to do and he chooses to use his power mercifully to bless, to give, not to withhold.

[26 : 20] You see, God doesn't need to do anything for himself, if I can put it that way. God doesn't need to be richer than he is. He doesn't need to be more powerful than he is. He doesn't need to have more authority than he has.

He has everything, absolutely. There's nothing that we can give him, there's nothing that he needs to take, there's nothing that he needs to do to add to who he is because he is infinite and perfect and limitless.

So whenever God acts, it must be for others. And that's exactly what it is. The actions of God are done for us. The blessing on the nations, the blessing to all people that he promised to Abraham is because he is merciful and his desire is to do us good.

the giving of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the giving of the most dear and delightful joy of his heart was for us, for the people of this world, for you, for me.

How does that happen? How do we enter into the blessing of God? How do we know and experience the blessing of God?

[27 : 42] Well, Mary mentions some of the things that he does. Verse 51, he's performed mighty deeds with his arm, those mighty deeds of mercy.

He has scattered those who are proud. He's brought down rulers from their throne. He has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry, sent away the rich empty.

That doesn't seem to sound quite right, does it? We can understand God's acts of mercy being lifting up the humble and feeding the hungry. That's very much in keeping with our idea of mercy. But bringing down rulers, scattering the proud in their inmost thoughts, sending away the rich. But remember, when Peter preached on that day in Acts 3, I said to you, he spoke about the promise of Abraham and God, he says, sent his servant Jesus to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.

The blessing of God begins with turning us from sin, turning us from our wicked ways, bringing us to see what we really are like in his sight.

[28 : 57] The greatest blessing that God can bring to a person begins with him scattering their proud thoughts and emptying their full hearts. That doesn't sound right in our way of thinking.

You see, proud thoughts and full hearts prevent us from receiving God's blessing. blessing. When we're content with who we are, when we believe ourselves to be, well, the rulers of our lives and to have everything under our authority, when we think of ourselves as there, the rulers on our throne, when we think of ourselves as rich and, well, good and okay, and when we think of God as being unnecessary or, well, small, we can't receive the blessing of God.

We never shall receive the blessing of God. We shall never know what it is to be filled with good things. We shall never know what it is to be lifted up because we're already exalted in our own thoughts and our own ideas, our own way of thinking.

We shall never know the blessing of God. We shall never know the blessing of his forgiveness. We shall never know the blessing of eternal life and of joy and of peace and of knowing that we're loved of God. None of these things because we've just got our lives filled with everything else and we just see no need.

See, God can only fill the hungry because the full are full. God can only lift up the humble because the proud are already up there already.

[30 : 43] The blessing of God is that he intervenes in our lives to take turn us from our sin and the self-destruction that it brings upon our own heads. The opposite of God's blessing is for God to do nothing in your life.

The opposite of God's blessing is for him to leave you alone, to follow the course of your life wherever you want to go. When God doesn't disturb us, when God lets us carry on following the crowd down the road to destruction, that's the opposite of the blessing of God.

If you've never been troubled by thoughts about your need for forgiveness, if you've never been troubled and you've been quite happy going your own way without any consideration of God, then let me say to you that you're not blessed.

You're in the worst possible position there could be. So Mary considers herself blessed because God has come into her life and disturbed it.

Mary, you found favor with God, says the angel. God is gracious to you, not because you're a good person, not because you've done the thing right, not because you're a saint or wonderful and deserve to be praised and prayed to.

[32 : 06] No, she's a young, ordinary girl. God has come to her and in grace and favor he has unsettled her life. Imagine, there she is, a young woman, how old maybe, 16, 17, 18, something like that.

She's engaged to Joseph, another man in the village that she's known probably since she was a child. And what's her plans? We're going to have a lovely wedding, a family wedding.

And then we're going to think about having some children. And then we're going to sort of settle down and I'm going to make a nice home and we're going to bring those children up. And it's just going to be a lovely, peaceful, idyllic, rural life.

But now she's pregnant out of marriage. She's brought, she's a disgrace to him and to herself and to her family. After the child is born, she's going to have to be running for her life as a refugee into a foreign land of Egypt where she'll live for several years bringing up her son with her husband.

Eventually she'll come home and at one point in her life she will have to watch her son being murdered before her eyes. Now she doesn't know all that.

[33 : 20] Of course she doesn't know all that. But she knows where it's heading. She knows that she's going to be a disgrace. She knows that things are not going to work out as she wants. She knows that all her plans, all her nice ideas are scuppered.

And God has done it because he's broken into her life and he's disrupted her in the way that she's going so that she will now be carrying this child who will be the very son of God and the savior of the world.

And how does she react to this intervention of God in her life? I'm the Lord's servant, she says. May the word of the Lord be fulfilled to me.

Everybody's going to call me blessed. Hold on, they're not going to call you blessed, they're going to call you rude names because you've had a child and you've not been married.

They're going to call after the blood of your son and murder him. They're going to call you most miserable of women who's had to watch your son suffer in this way.

[34 : 26] How can she welcome God's interruption into her life? How can she accept it as being a blessing? Because she has faith. She has faith in the God who is faithful.

She has faith in the God who keeps his promises. She is faithful in the God who promises to bless. The God of mercy.

The God of loving kindness. The God who acts. The God who reaches down to those in need and lifts them up. The God who brings forgiveness to sinners. The God who is unwilling to let this world slide into its own self-destruction.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed for the mighty one's done great things for me. If you have been disturbed in your life, if you have found your plans turned upside down, if you have realized that you need mercy, help from God, then you're blessed.

You're blessed because you have the opportunity now of receiving the blessing of God. You've got the opportunity now to realize that in my life I cannot possibly earn God's favor.

[36 : 03] but I need his forgiveness. You've realized for the first time in your life perhaps that you are not the one who's got all the answers to all the problems or all the solutions to all the questions.

You've felt your own mortality. You've felt your own weakness. You've felt the very pain and reality of sin. You've felt the reality of sin. And now you've got the opportunity to receive the healing, to receive the forgiveness, to receive the wholeness, to receive the life, to receive the love, to receive the goodness of God.

How will you respond? Will you say, Lord, I'm your servant and I need your blessing?

Or are you going to turn around and say, God can't do anything for me? I don't need God to do anything for me. Long ago there was a man called Jacob.

You can read about him in Genesis. He met with God and he fought with God. And he lost the fight.

[37 : 24] But he said to God in the midst of it, I will not let you go unless you bless me. Can you say that to God?

I'm going to keep on nagging you, God, until you bless me. I'm going to keep on praying until you bless me. I'm going to keep on holding on to your promises until you bless me. And God blessed him.

And he walked with a limp the rest of his life. The blessing of God is not that our lives are easy, pain-free, suffering-free.

The blessing of God is not that we are rich, fat, content. The blessing of God is that he has come to us and saved us and brought us into his grace.

Let's pray together. Lord, we've got to confess that our way of thinking is not your way of thinking.

[38 : 53] Our thoughts are not your thoughts. Our ways are not your ways. You are so totally way and above our limited, earthbound understanding.

You're a big God. A mighty God. A merciful God. And, O Lord, we have so often thought that we know exactly what is the right thing, the good thing, the blessed thing.

So often we think we know the answers. But, Lord, we thank you again that you are the God who not only knows the answers, but you are the answer.

And in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, you provided for us the answer. The answer to this world.

The answer to our own failings. And that answer is your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came as the fulfillment of your promise to bless all people.

We thank you, Lord, that blessing is comes to us, first of all, by disturbing us and unsettling us and making us see that we need you.

[40 : 11] God, thank you that that blessing leads to joy unspeakable like that of Mary, fulfillment and forgiveness. And we pray, O Lord, for those of us here this morning who've never really known that blessing, that blessing of God that is able to say, I know that you're my God and my Savior and my Lord and my friend.

We pray, O Lord, that you would be pleased to disturb us, bring us low when we are on the throne, set on high, to, Lord, scatter our proud thoughts.

Show us, O Lord, that your thoughts and your ways are best. Thank you, Lord, for your great grace in giving Jesus. Thank you for all that he means to us and all that he's done for us in his life and death and resurrection.

Thank you for the grace he's poured out into our lives. Help us ever to be grateful. Help us ever to call ourselves blessed because of what you've done for us.

Amen. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

[41 : 24] The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace. Amen.