

Christmas: What is God doing?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 December 2017

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Well tonight I want us to turn back to Luke chapter 1 and in particular we are going to focus on the words of verse 46 to 55. And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked on the humbly state 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 pride and the thoughts of their hearts, he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humbly state, 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 her father, to Abraham and to his offspring forever. Now as I'm sure many of you will know these words are known as the Magnificat. Magnificat is the first Latin phrase, first Latin word in these verses. And that's the term used to describe these words of praise that Mary gives. And we can see that the first phrase there, my soul magnifies the Lord, we can see where that word

Magnificat would come from. These verses record for us Mary's words of praise as she and her relative Elizabeth think and talk about all that God is going to do in their lives. We were reading about what had happened to them both. Elizabeth has conceived and Mary also is given this remarkable message from the angel Gabriel. And when she receives this message she goes to visit her elderly relative Elizabeth who also has been given an amazing promise from God. We've got these two women before us. Both have conceived miraculously. One was so old that she was past the time of bearing children. The other was so young that she was still a virgin. And we have this wonderful description in chapter one of the old Elizabeth and the young Mary coming together, two expectant mothers talking and thinking about all that lies ahead. And if you can just imagine them, imagine Elizabeth and Mary, you can picture the excitement, the shock and the wonder at all that was taking place. And in the midst of that joy and anticipation, Mary speaks these remarkable words of praise that we have recorded for us. And I want us just to look at these together and we've been tonight. There's so much in these verses that as always will only be scratching the surface. But what is remarkable and I think wonderful about both Mary and Elizabeth is that even though there's this amazing anticipation, there's this great excitement because they are expecting children, they have received these magnificent messages, something wonderful is about to happen to them both. The great thing about Mary and Elizabeth is that they are aware that even though something amazing is happening to them personally, all of this is part of something much, much bigger. And they are excited, not just because they're pregnant, but because of all that God is about to do. And that's one of the wonderful things about Mary's words in these verses. Her focus is first and foremost on what God is doing. And so as we look at these versions together, that's the question I want us to ask. What is God doing in the coming of Jesus Christ? What is God doing? Well, there's a lot that we could say, but I want us just to focus on three things together. First of all, God is showing his strength. If you read through the first few verses of Mary's words of praise, there is an incredibly clear and strong emphasis on the power and might of God. If you look at it, she says, He is Lord, He is Savior, He is mighty. And then verse 51, He has shown strength with his arm. And Mary is highlighting many of the key truths that we know about God. We sang about that in Psalm 89. God has an arm that's full of power. His hand is great in might. God is abounding in strength, power, authority. He is the one who is saviour because he is able to save. He is mighty to save. God, as I'm sure you all know, is incredibly strong. However, the vital thing that we have to remember is that at this moment in time, way back in 90-something BC, when Mary and Elizabeth stood together in the hill country of Judea, at that time, God looked weak.

[5 : 50] God, in many ways, looked very weak. Why was that? Well, back in the Old Testament, the people of Israel had been given two great promises. They've been given many great promises, but there were perhaps two in particular that were foundational to their identity. They had this promise that they were going to be a great people and they had this promise that they were going to possess a great land. That's what God promised to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12. The Lord said to Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonours you. I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. That is the foundational promise for the whole of the rest of the Old Testament and at the heart of it lies the fact that God's people, Abraham's descendants, are going to be a great people and they're going to have a great land. And as you read through the Old Testament, you see that despite massive opposition,

God keeps this promise. He establishes people, he establishes his people and he provides them with a land. They ended up as slaves in Egypt but the Egyptians could not stop them from leaving. The Canaanites could not stop them from possessing a land. In the days of David and Solomon, the kingdom was established, the borders were extended, the nation became great. And God did amazing things. He did remarkable miracles to people like Moses and Elijah and Elisha. He gave Israel magnificent victories over their enemies, even over enemies that looked way more powerful than they were. Yet God gave victory to them and God sent them wise prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and all the others who taught the people and gave them God's word in person. The Old Testament was full of remarkable things that God did for his people. But by the end of the Old Testament, Israel was a weak and battered nation. In fact, they were barely a nation at all. All that was left of them was a remnant. And as Mary and as Elizabeth stood there in the hill country of Judea, the last time that God had spoken was 400 years earlier when Malachi was a prophet. And just think about that. Think about 400 years. Imagine the year 1617. What was happening in Lewis in the year 1617? Does anybody have even the remotest idea? Because I don't. 400 years ago, it seems like a million miles from today. And for these 400 years, God's people struggled and God's people were weak. And that inter-testamental period, that's what we call it, the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the inter-testamental period was 400 years where God's people were weak and everybody else looked much stronger. And really, although God's people had been promised the land and promised that they would be a nation, for these 400 years, they were simply part of bigger empires. They were simply colonies, that's the word I'm looking for, they were colonies of larger, more powerful empires. And I'll show you them. Don't worry, you probably won't have heard of half of these people, but just to show you who ruled the area, we'll go through it together. Towards the end of the Old Testament, you had the Babylonian empire.

You're familiar with that. They're the people who conquered Jerusalem in 587 and took people away in exile. After them came the Persian empire. We read about Persia in Daniel and in Esther. [10 : 41] They dominated the area for 200 years. Who came after Persia? Alexander the Great and the Greek empire. Alexander, as I'm sure you know, conquered pretty much everything that was in front of him.

But he died quite young and after his death, his kingdom collapsed. And there arose the next rulers, which were the Ptolemy's. They were based primarily in Egypt and they controlled the area, that area of Palestine that the Jewish people lived in. They too then lost power to the Seljuzids who were from Syria originally. They ruled over the area from 200 to 143 BC, it says there. Now, we need to pause with them because one of their kings was called Antiochus IV. Now, again, don't worry if you've never heard of these names, it doesn't matter at all. But Antiochus IV was a brutal king and he came to Jerusalem and he plundered the temple and he set up a pagan altar where the altar of burnt offering was supposed to be. And instead of sacrifices being offered to God, they offered sacrifices to Zeus, the Greek god. Now, Tyand imagine what that must be like for the Israelite people. For the Israelites, their nation was important, the land, but most important was Jerusalem and most important was the temple in the middle of Jerusalem. That was the absolute heart of the Jewish nation. That was where all their religious life focused and this king, Antiochus IV came and turned the Jewish temple into a place where Zeus was worshiped. And to the Jewish mind, that was just as low as things could possibly, possibly go. So right there in between the old and the New Testament, you've got this horrendous low point in the experience of the Jewish

people. Various conflicts and rebellions followed. You had another dynasty called the Hasmonians and they were more Jewish. But again, they were sort of taking power for themselves in a way that did not correspond to what God had taught in the Old Testament. And then in 67 BC, who came along? The Romans. And in 63 BC, Jerusalem was conquered. Now, as I said, don't worry if you've not heard of these people before and I must confess, I know very little about the Ptolemies and the Hasmonians. I know a tiny bit about the Seleucids. The main point is this, they were the powerful ones. Israel were nothing. The people of God were weak.

And at the time of Mary and Elizabeth, what was left of the Israelites was now under Roman rule. So instead of being this great nation who was going to possess the land, the Israelites were a weak nation ruled by a pagan empire governed by regional kings and Roman officials. There was no Davidic king on the throne, as the Old Testament had promised. There was no presence of God's glory in the temple as there had been in the days of Solomon and in the kings after him. There was no freedom for the nation as they had once enjoyed in their own independence. There was no holiness in the land. Greek culture was dominating everything and people weren't obeying God's law. And the people of Israel must have just been dreaming for a salvation that looked like it was never going to come. And I think that if you could look at this humble young girl called Mary in the middle of all that, you would look at her and you would think, well, I don't know what she believes, but her God must be pretty weak. And yet in the midst of all that, Mary realises that God is about to show how strong he really is. And the proud and arrogant opponents of God are going to be scattered and the mighty powers of the world are going to be brought down from their thrones and a child is going to be born and he will be great and will be called the son of the Most High and the Lord will give to him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end. That's what Gabriel told Mary. God is about to show his strength. God's king is coming and up until Mary's time it must have seemed as though the kingdom of evil was the one that had all the strength. But now, now God is going to show that he is king. He's going to establish his kingdom and he's going to show how strong he really is.

[16:35] And that reminds us of something really, really important. When we think of Christmas, when we think of Jesus being born, we tend to think of him in terms of being a vulnerable baby. And that's true. He was born in humility. But we must never forget that at the same time, although there was all this humility and vulnerability about Jesus's birth, at the same time that is a mighty, mighty show of strength. God is displaying his strength. God is sending his king. Remember, who was it who appeared to the shepherds? It was an army of angels. And what did they say?

They said peace on earth. And if you are in a war, when is it that you say peace? It's when victory is won. And that's the amazing thing about the baby in Mary's womb. Yes, he's going to be born as a vulnerable baby, but he is going to grow into a mighty warrior who will defeat the greatest enemy that the world has ever known. We often think of Jesus's birth in gentle terms and in some ways that's appropriate. But when Mary thought about the birth of this child, she was not so much thinking meek. She was thinking mighty. God is showing his strength.

And all of this reminds us that we must never, ever, ever think that God is weak.

People look at the church today and they think it's weak. People look at Christianity, they think it's outdated or irrelevant or backward. And the power of the world, the power of secularism, the power of Islam, the power of atheism, all these things look strong. But never, ever forget that back in Mary's day, Rome looked strong. And 300 years before that, Greece looked strong.

But are they still strong today? The empires of Rome and the empires of Greece are literally ancient history. But God's kingdom is bigger than ever. It is growing from strength to strength every year. So going into 2018, going into a new year, don't ever forget that God is strong. God can do and he is doing amazing things. And whatever challenges we face as individuals, or as families, or as a church, God forbid that we ever forget who the strong one really is.

[19:39] And when you stand up for God in your work or in your home or in your community or in whatever it is you're doing, when you stand up for God, you are standing alongside the one who is mighty.

You're standing alongside the Lord. You're standing alongside the Savior. When God sent his Son, and he was showing us how strong he is, and we live and rejoice in the victory that he has won, and in the kingdom that he is building, Mary is reminding us that God is showing his strength.

That's the first thing that we see. Secondly, in the coming of Jesus, we see that God is filling the hungry with good things. As we said, remember when we think about the the birth of Jesus, we tend

to think of it in terms of vulnerability, of weakness and in humility.

And that's true, as Ahib said. But imagine Jesus there with Mary having just been born. Imagine you could just picture her in your mind. She's perhaps sitting down and she's holding the tiny baby in her arms all wrapped up. Think of Mary holding her baby and ask yourself the question, who is the vulnerable one?

Who's the vulnerable one? And the real answer is Mary. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and everyone else who saw Jesus when he was born. They are the ones who are vulnerable because it's humanity that is weak and vulnerable. We are the ones who need to be rescued. And it is the baby in Mary's arms who has come to be our Savior. He's the one who's come to rescue us from our great need.

[21 : 49] And the only reason that Jesus is a vulnerable baby at that moment in time is because he was willing to become one of us. And because of the flesh and blood that we share as humans, he likewise himself partook of the same things in order to deliver us. We are the weak ones.

We are the ones who are in desperate need. And Mary recognizes this. She recognizes that in the coming of Jesus, the mighty God is going to fill the hungry with good things. What's God doing when he sends his son? He's filling the hungry with good things. In other words, he knows that we are in need. This raises a really, really important truth that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Who is this gospel for? Who is Christianity for? Who is the message of Jesus for?

It's for the hungry. It's for the hungry. Now, this is very, very important because if the gospel is for the hungry, then it means that the number one qualification for becoming a Christian is to be lacking, not abounding lacking. Because if you're hungry, you are lacking. And in the gospel, the God is not congratulating the fool. He is feeding the hungry. Now, it's also really important that we make sure we understand that word hungry accurately. Sometimes when we think of hunger and the gospel, we think of hunger in terms of a good thing. We say that you've got a hunger for God in the sense that you are longing for him, that you're looking forward to worshiping him, that you want him, that you want to serve him. Now, when we talk about hunger in that sense, it's a great thing to say and a great thing to think. But when we use the word hungry, we really are meaning the idea of being zealous or passionate. And that's a brilliant thing. We are hungry for God. We've got our zeal for worship. We are enthusiastic. We are longing to be closer to him. We sometimes use the word hunger in that way. And that's absolutely fine. But I don't think that's the primary meaning of the word hunger. And we have to make sure we recognize the primary meaning of what this word hunger means. The main point about that word hungry is not that the gospel is for those who are zealous and passionate. The main point of the word hungry is that Jesus has come for the people who've got nothing. For the people who have got absolutely nothing.

Jesus has not come for the spiritually zealous. He's come for the spiritually dead. He's come for those who are empty. He's come for the beggars. He's come for the struggling.

[25 : 24] He's come for the ones who are dying because they've not got what they need. And again, this is where we have to sort of tie in stature minds a wee bit because when we think of hunger, we think of really wanting our dinner, don't we? Maybe we get home from a busy day at work and you think, oh, I'm starving and I really, really want my dinner. But that's not real hunger.

Real hunger in a famine is not just a feeling that you want your dinner.

In a famine, hunger is when your body is slowly shutting down because you are desperately deprived of what you need. And if you think about somebody in a famine, why is it that they're hungry?

Because they've got absolutely nothing. They have no resources themselves whatsoever. And spiritually speaking, that is our situation. We've got nothing. We've got no resources of our own. We come to God with nothing but our neediness. We come to God fading, stumbling, struggling, failing with bodies and minds that are just empty with nothing to offer him, nothing to contribute. We come in total weakness and God says, I'm going to fill the hungry with good things. And this is one of the clearest reminders that we do not come to God once we are good enough. We do not build up our strength and then become a Christian. We do not increase our resources and then start going to the prayer meeting or then become a member of the church.

We do not build ourselves up and then follow God. It's so easy to think like that. Maybe you think like that. Maybe you think that I need to get stronger. I need to get better. I need to get wiser. I need to get smarter before I come to faith. But none of that is true because Jesus has come for the hungry. The number one qualification for coming to Jesus is to be lacking, not abounding, lacking.

The word hunger is not talking about somebody who's firing with passion. It's talking about somebody who is fading away in weakness. And maybe that's how you feel. Maybe that's how you feel as a Christian. Maybe you feel I'm just fading and I'm losing my strength and everything is getting weaker. Maybe you're not getting a Christian. You think I can't become a Christian because [28 : 39] I'm nowhere near what I should be. I'm just poor and weak and malnourished and far from what God wants me to be. That's exactly who God has come to save. Always remember that God is the strong one, not you. And that's why all you need to say to Jesus in order to become a Christian is Lord, I need you. Jesus has come to fill the hungry. But notice also he's come to fill the hungry with good things. That's the amazing thing about God, his great goal is to be good to us. Never, ever forget that. So many people are held back from becoming a Christian because they think that God is going to be bad to me. They think God's going to spoil my life. He's going to change things for the worse. He's going to make things hard for me. He is not going to do that. Of course he's not going to do that because God's goal is to be good to you. God wants to fill you with good things.

Now that is not referring to material prosperity because we often find that although we think that our greatest need is for more wealth, all too often as Mary reminds us it's the rich who end up empty because putting your trust in material possessions leaves you empty. Even ourselves, will any of us be happier on Boxing Day when our houses are full of more stuff? Of course we won't because ultimately it makes no difference. Good things is not talking about material prosperity.

In fact it's talking about things that are far, far better than that. What is God talking about? What are these good things? Well let's ask ourselves the question. What do you really hunger for? What do you really hunger for? What do people really hunger for in life?

Well I've got a series of examples. I've just kind of, there's no particular order for them, but there's a list of things that I think people hunger for. People hunger for peace. Peace between fellow man but also peace within ourselves. People hate feeling stress, pressure, anxiety.

We don't want to feel like that. We want peace. People long for justice. If somebody is mistreated, if things are done badly, if people are being exploited, we long for justice. We long for security as well. We want to be safe. We don't want to be exposed to danger. We want to be safe.

[31 : 40] We want to be secure. People hunger for righteousness. Everybody has a sense of right and wrong. When something wrong happens we all say that's not right and we long for righteousness. We long for truth. We want to know what the truth is and we want people to be truthful and honest with us.

None of us wants to be on the receiving end of dishonesty or lies. We long for friendship. We hunger for companionship. We're not built to be alone. We don't want to be alone. We want friends. We hunger for family for the precious time where we're able to be together as loved ones. We long for joy in life. None of us wake up every morning saying, I want to be sad today. We want to be joyful. We want peace. We want happiness. We want our hearts to rejoice and above all we long for love. Love of a family. Love of friends. Love of a community. People hunger for love. These are the kind of hunger that everybody on the planet is trying to satisfy. But it's only in the Gospel that all of these hunger are really filled. Because in the Gospel you will find perfect peace. A peace that is so amazing it can't be described. In the Gospel we have perfect justice where God deals with everything that is wrong once and for all. In the Gospel we have this amazing security where absolutely no one and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. In the Gospel we have righteousness whereby Christ's righteousness is given to us and we are being transformed every day more and more into the righteous image of God's Son. In the Gospel we have truth, God's word for us. We learn how to understand the world and how to understand life. In the Gospel we have friendship. God himself becomes our dearest friend. We have an amazing family that we are part of as a church where everybody is equal, where everybody is welcome, where we are one. Doesn't matter if we're men or women, boys or girls, rich, poor, whatever. It makes no difference because we are all one in Jesus Christ. In the Gospel we have joy that is indescribable and in the Gospel we have love that never ever ever ends. We have God's eternal love and Mary is saying a Savior is coming and our desperate spiritual hunger is going to be filled and it's a great reminder that if you are hungry, if you are lacking, if you are fading in strength,

Jesus has come for you. So in the coming of Jesus what's God doing? He's showing his strength, he's filling the hungry and last thing very briefly, he is helping his people. Next one, sorry I forgot that slide, the next one. He is helping his people and he's remembering his mercy.

[35 : 12] This is where we see that Mary recognizes that her child is part of something much, much bigger and that's one of the most important points that's been emphasized in the birth narratives of Jesus in the New Testament. Both Matthew and Luke are absolutely full of references to the Old Testament and they want to make absolutely sure that we recognize that the birth of Jesus is utterly bound up with the fulfillment of all that God has promised in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament it said that the Messiah would be a descendant of David, it said that he would be born in Bethlehem, it said that the Virgin would conceive, it said that a voice in the wilderness would prepare the way and it said that the seed of Abraham would bring a blessing to the whole world and all the fulfillment of prophecy in Luke's early chapter and in Matthew's early chapter are highlighting the glorious truth that God does not forget his promises.

God has remembered his people, he is coming to help them and that's the amazing thing about the Gospel. In the Gospel God is showing his strength, in the Gospel we recognize our hunger and weakness and lack but in the Gospel the mighty God himself is promising that he is going to use his strength in order to save us. Remember what we said this was all at an absolute low point in the history of Israel and there must have been a huge temptation for people like Mary to think that God has forgotten us and God is not going to help but you can just imagine the joy in Mary's heart when she realized God has not forgotten and God is going to help and if that's true for Mary then boy is it true for you, God has not forgotten you and God has come to help you, God himself in the person of Jesus Christ has come to be the savior of the whole world and this is where we realize that everything that this child was going to be for Mary he's come to be that for you too, he's come to show his strength for you that glorious display of strength is for you, he's come to fill your hunger, your emptiness and weakness and he's come to help you because he has remembered you and he is ready to show you his amazing salvation. Remember what we said at the start at this time people like Mary were dreaming for salvation, what's God doing at Christmas? He's making our dreams of salvation come true and if we all look to him then he will save us, he will fill us with good things and he will never ever ever abandon us, that's the good news of the gospel and it's all there for you, he's come to be our savior, let's pray

God our Father we thank you so much that you have shown your strength for us, we thank you so much that you've come to fill the hungry with good things, we thank you so much that you have remembered your mercy and that you've come to help your people and we pray oh Lord that we would never look anywhere else but to you for salvation, for security, for hope, please draw us all closer to you, please lead us in your ways, we ask that everything that we do will be for you and for your glory and if any of us are seeking you just now we pray Lord that you would just give us all that simple prayer that says Lord I need you because Lord we do, we really need you, amen