

Why Can We Live with Hope this Christmas? Pt. III

~ Luke 1:39-56

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This Christmas season will be unlike any other we have seen in recent years. On Tuesday, our provincial government announced gathering restrictions that prohibit people from different households getting together socially. That means even immediate family members who live in different residences cannot gather unless they live alone and they have designated family members as their contacts. Violation of this public health order may result in a \$1000 fine but can be upgraded to 100,000\$ even for a first offense. Well that puts a damper on Christmas gatherings.

Yet, some families have experienced this kind of separation at Christmas in the past with little fanfare or notice. I've seen posts from military families who have to experience Christmas separation regularly. Hospital, police, fire and ambulance services require employees to show up on Christmas Day. Some Christians live in countries where Dec 25 is just a regular work day. So they have to figure out how to celebrate Christmas in that context. In my first job, I was a bus boy at a hotel. I remember working one Christmas Day serving 3 different Christmas banquets. How strange it felt to work on Christmas Day just like it was any other work day.

There's no sugar coating this. It's difficult. It might contribute to more discouragement or hopelessness this Christmas. So how can we address this? How can we go through a Christmas even like this with hope?

We've been talking about hope for the past two weeks. First, we learned that we can live with hope this Christmas because God shows up. We saw the Word becoming flesh. The Word was Jesus both God and human. His coming demonstrated God's care and love for us humans. Last week, we learned we can live with hope this Christmas because God speaks up. We saw that God has spoken in the past and still speaks now.

Today, we are going to see that **We can live with hope this Christmas because God lifts us up.** Specifically we will see God lift up those who are humble. How does God lifting up the humble enable us to live with hope this Christmas? Anyone can adopt a posture of humility. Anyone can experience the lifting up of God.

We will see this today in the Christmas story involving Mary. I love reading about Mary. I can't wait to meet her in heaven one day. I have so many questions. She seems so approachable. Today, we get to hear her thoughts on the monumental news she received from the angel Gabriel. She would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give

birth to God's Son. As we follow this story and her thoughts, we will look at how God picks up the humble. Then we will look at what is involved in living with humility today before we come to the Lord's Table.

Luke 1:39-56 (ESV)

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be ^[a] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Luke has just finished writing about the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. She received the news that she would conceive and bear a son miraculously. She was to call Him Jesus. He would be Son of the Most High. The Lord would give Him the throne of His father David. After some further clarification, Mary accepts this call on her life.

We pick up the story in verse 39. Mary leaves Nazareth to go visit her relative Elizabeth. Why? Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son even though she was called barren. Maybe Mary wants to share her news with someone who understands bearing a son under miraculous circumstances. Yet notice where she has to travel.

"She went with haste to the hill country, to a town in Judah."

Mary lives in the town of Nazareth, in the northern region of Galilee. Elizabeth lives in a town somewhere in the southern region of Judah. The journey could have been anywhere from 80-100 kilometers on foot or some sort of cart. It would likely take around 4-5 days to get there. Now she didn't have headphones to listen to music or a podcast. She would not have personal scrolls to read on her way. She likely had plenty of time to think.

When she arrives a pre-natal miracle occurs. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps at the sound of Mary's voice. So, Elizabeth becomes a prophetess speaking the Lord's praise by the power of the Holy Spirit. She likely did not know that Mary would bear the Messiah until this moment. Then Elizabeth pronounces a blessing on Mary for believing what the Lord spoke to her through Gabriel.

Then Mary speaks a beautiful poem that magnifies the Lord. Some know it as the "Magnificat" because it's the Latin word for magnify. Many have studied the poem and concluded that it seems like a later addition. They argue it may have been Luke's insertion. Mary could not have come up with this because she was an uneducated peasant girl from a backward village maybe 14 years old.

But I don't agree with any of that. The first century Jewish community was very well versed in Scripture. They also practiced memorization and had far less distraction than we do today. They focused on surviving and living by the word of God. On top of that, Mary would have known the story of Hannah from the Old Testament. She was barren for many years until she finally had a son who became the prophet Samuel. Hannah wrote a song praising the Lord for his work in her life. I think there is a strong possibility that Mary meditated on Hannah's song on the journey and adapted it for her circumstances.

So she says – "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Why? "For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant." Mary magnifies the Lord for looking on her humble circumstances. What's so great about that? First, to "look" at her meant the Lord paid attention to her. Yet at that time, she had no status in her culture outside of the village. She came from a small town in a region far from the capital city of Jerusalem. Second, she came from a poor family. We learn this from the offering she and Joseph gave at the temple when they presented baby Jesus. They offered a dove reserved for the poorest families. Third, she was a woman. Sadly, that culture at that time placed low value on the word of a woman. They didn't even admit the testimony of a woman in court. So the world would not look of Mary. A poor peasant girl from a backwards town in the country. But the Lord looked at her in her humble estate.

Then she recognizes the massive impact of this conception on her. "For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed." All generations know Mary's name because of the child she bore. So she praises the Lord's greatness and personal intervention into her life. Verse 49 – "For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Yet this powerful and holy God also shows mercy. Verse 50 – "And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to

generation.” Mary praises the Lord for personally blessing – She also recognizes His wider blessing of mercy to any who have healthy reverence of Him.

So what do we learn from Mary? God used Mary from a humble estate and lifted her up. We may see this and think; no big deal. People from ordering and backgrounds can rise up to do great things. But in those days that hardly ever happened. There was no middle class; just the few who were rich and the multitude of the poor. In addition to this, in those days, most believed that wealth indicated God’s blessing. Poverty indicated God’s absence.

You may have heard the Bible account of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked what he must do to be saved?” Jesus said keep the commandments and sell everything you have and give to the poor. The rich young man turned away sadly. Jesus said in Matthew 19:23, “Truly, truly I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.” Then the disciples respond. Matthew 19:25 – “When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished saying, “Who then can be saved?” If rich people only enter the kingdom of heaven with difficulty, who can be saved. We believe that the rich are greatly blessed by God.” But Jesus would turn this belief upside down. The Lord’s looking on Mary in a humble estate.

If you live in some humble circumstances, or face a hard situation. Don’t conclude the Lord ignore you. The Lord looks on the oppressed and suffering. We see this develop further.

Verses 51-53 – “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.” This sounds like a great social reversal. The proud and rich receive harsh treatment from God. He scatters their thoughts. He brings down the mighty from their thrones and sends the rich away empty handed when they are used to being full. Those in humble estate, however, God will exalt and fill with good things. So if you live in a humble state, or situation, are you guaranteed God’s blessing?

God identifies with these in humble circumstances. God certainly demonstrates a compassionate heart towards people in a humble estate. Jesus would grow up in the humble town of Nazareth. He was born into a poor family. He never had wealth or royal power. He lived and ministered primarily among the poor. Yet, living in humble circumstances does not guarantee love for God. Many people living in humble circumstances rejected Jesus. They initially hailed him as Messiah because they hoped He would bring in a sociopolitical

revolution. They wanted Him to overthrow the Romans and the wealthy royal priestly class that ruled in Jerusalem. They expected him to give them power and fill up the poor. But as soon as they discovered He would not be that kind of Messiah, they abandoned Him. They called for His execution and chanted for the release of a political revolutionary. So God looks on those living in a humble state, but people living in that state may not be open to God or His blessing.

So why did God choose Mary? **Mary displayed a humble attitude.** After her brief conversation with Gabriel, Mary responded to this call of God in Luke 1:38. She did not say “Let me think about it. This will fit into my career plans.” She did not make demands or secure a contract or treasure for her family. She said words that many find almost offensive today – “Behold, I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be done to me according to your word.” These are the not the words of a doormat submitting to an oppressive lord. They reveal a humble servant, willing to accept this call; willing to face the trouble that would come with it. God raised up one who lived in a humble state and also had a humble heart.

Scripture regularly testifies of God’s positive response to a humble heart. I could find around 8 promises or actions of God

towards the humble. So I’m just going to list them and read the passages associated with them.

How does God respond to humble people?

He protects them from disaster or destruction and grants deliverance. 1 Kings 21:29 - “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house.” 2 Chronicles 12:6-7 - Then the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, “The LORD is righteous.” Then the LORD saw that they humbled themselves, the word of the LORD came to Shemaiah: “They have humbled themselves. I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some deliverance, and my wrath shall not be poured out on Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak.

The Lord hears from heaven, forgives sin and heals the land. 2 Chronicles 7:14 - If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

The Lord saves humble people. Psalm 18:27 – For you save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down. Psalm 149:4 -

For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation.

The Lord leads and teaches the humble. Psalm 25:9 - He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

He gives favor to the humble. - Proverbs 3:34 - Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor. James 4:6 - But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

He looks at the humble. He pays attention as we've seen in Mary's son. Isaiah 66:2 - All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

He regards the humble as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:4 - Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

He lifts up the humble. Psalm 147:6- The LORD lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground. Matthew 23:12 - Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Luke 18:14 - I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will

be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." James 4:10 - Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. 1 Peter 5:6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.

And if that isn't enough, Jesus came with humility. Matthew 21:5 "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'" Philippians 2:8 - And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

We can live with hope this Christmas because God lifts up the humble. God lifted up Mary to give birth to Jesus and guide him into adulthood. What does it mean to be lifted up by God for us? To receive God's grace and mercy; to receive God's care and strength; to receive salvation from the Lord along with His love. It will lead to appropriate glory and reward in the next life. It will result in responsibility in the kingdom of heaven and a life of fulfillment. It may involve many of the blessings we just learned from that Scriptural survey of the word humble. Though the world may not look at us favourably, God looks at those humble and contrite in spirit.

So we need to adopt a humble posture. How? First, we need to ask God to grow in us a right view of ourselves and of Him. We need to see who God is and see who we are. He will transform our thinking so we do not think too highly of ourselves and in some cases so we do not think too low of ourselves.

Second, towards others. We need to adopt Jesus' attitude towards anyone we consider to be lower than us. I know we would all claim that we do not think anyone is lower than us. Yet maybe we need to pause and check our thoughts about this. We may think ourselves higher than someone else because they have or make less money than we do; or they live in a lower priced place than we do. We may think someone lower because they have less education. We may think someone lower because they work in some minimum wage job compared to our salary. We may think we're higher because we're smarter or have more knowledge; or we are more skilled or trained at something than them.

We may look down on someone because of their age. The older may look down on the younger for their crazy ideas and irresponsibility. The young look down on the old for their stubbornness and resistance to change. Think about the people on the other side of the political spectrum to you. Do you look down on them thinking your side is better

and higher? What about people who have a different view than you about the pandemic, the virus and the restrictions? What about us as Christians? Do we look down on the non-Christians thinking ourselves superior or more righteous than them?

Instead of looking down on anyone, we need to see him or her as the Lord sees them. They are His creation stamped with His image. They need love, respect and good news. We need the Lord's empowering to walk with humility in our emotionally charged world of today.

We must also cherish the reality that whatever state we find ourselves in today, the Lord will look on those who have humble hearts. He does not look at bank accounts, status or an air of having everything together. He looks at us with love offering His salvation. If you've never humbled yourself before the Lord, now is the time to do it. You can do that now to receive His salvation and mercy.