

# “#Blessed: Mary’s Psalm” // Luke 1:46–56 // *When It Doesn’t Feel Like Christmas #4*<sup>1</sup>

## Intro

Merry Christmas everyone. I heard a story about a wife who was getting ready to come to Christmas services like this one. She was just about finished getting ready, and thought he was ... but when she came downstairs, she saw he was still sitting there in his pajamas. She said, “Why aren’t you ready? We need to go.”

He said, “I don’t want to go to that church.” She said, “Why not? We agreed on this. The whole family is going.” He said, “Three reasons. #1. Nobody there is friendly to me. 2. Everybody there is suspicious of me. And 3. I just don’t enjoy it.” She said, “First, that’s not true. Some people there *are* friendly. You just look so grouchy all the time. #2. The suspicion is mainly in your head. #3. You’re the pastor. You have to go.” That was my wife and me a couple of hours ago.

Whatever your situation, we welcome you here ...

## Message

For the last few weeks, we’ve been in a series called “When It Doesn’t Feel Like Christmas,” in which Pastor Bryan and I have been taking you through various Psalms where the writer is in a season in which he feels alone and in the dark.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources consulted: Tim Keller, “How to Sing at Christmas,” sermon delivered at Redeemer Presbyterian; Tim Keller, “Mary’s Song,” sermon delivered at Redeemer Presbyterian; Steven Furtick, “There’s Been a Change of Plans.”

- **If you’ve ever thought Christianity is only** for “super polished and put-together people,” my guess is you’ve never properly read the Psalms—they are written by people full of sadness, doubts, and even anger toward God.
- Today, we’re going to look at a **New Testament psalm**, and maybe you didn’t know there was such a thing. (You say, “I thought Psalms was an Old Testament book.”) True, but Mary, the mother of Jesus, wrote her own psalm, and it’s found **in Luke 1 at the commencement of the Christmas story**, if you want to turn there.
- Mary wrote her psalm shortly after the angel Gabriel announced to her that she, a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, would be conceived with child by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Messiah, the Son of God, who would be the Savior of the world.
- We call this psalm “**Mary’s Magnificat**.”

You may never have picked up on this, but Mary’s whole encounter with the angel is **saturated by the Psalms ...**

- When the angel **Gabriel announces to Mary** she’s going to give birth, he quotes from both Psalm 132 and Psalm 2.
- **And then the Magnificat, which is Mary’s response to the announcement, references the Psalms in almost every line.** (I’ll show you that in a second.)
- But it’s **as if the Bible writers set up the birth of Jesus as the answer** to all the anguish and unanswered questions expressed in the Psalms.
- **And so this seemed a fitting end to our series in the Psalms.**

I’m going to read the Magnificat to you in its entirety, and then I’m going to show you how it’s God’s answer to us “When It Doesn’t Feel Like Christmas.” This is such an incredible passage; could we just stand as I read it?

46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, (that’s Ps 34:2–3)

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior (Ps 35:9)

48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant (Ps 138:6). For **behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed** (Ps 72:17);

49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name (Ps 126:2–3).

50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation (Ps 103:17).

51 He has shown strength with his arm (Ps 89:10); he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts (Ps 18:27);

52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate (Ps 113:7–8);

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty (Ps 107:9).

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy (Ps 98:3),

55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (Ps 105:8–9)

Thanks. You may be seated. Mary basically strung together a bunch of psalms to write her own. Again, it’s as if she sees the birth of Jesus as the answer to all the anguish and unanswered questions expressed in the Psalms.

**The theme of Mary’s psalm is blessing.**

- In v. 48 she says, **“From now on all generations will call me blessed.”**

- When Gabriel made his announcement to her, blessing was the theme of his announcement. His *first words to her were that she was blessed* and “highly favored.”
- When Elizabeth, Mary’s older cousin, greeted her, she calls Mary blessed three times in her first two sentences to her: **vs. 42, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”** And then again in **vs. 45, “Blessed are you, Mary, who believed ...”**

But here’s my question: **if you had been an independent observer of Mary’s life, would you have called her “blessed”?**

“Blessing” is an overused word in our society ...

- Sometimes, we use the word just to mean somebody’s “rich”: You go to someone’s house for small group, and it’s gargantuan and you’re like, “This is such a nice house!” And what do they say? *“Well, we’ve really been ... blessed.”*
- Sometimes, we use the word to convey little more than “good luck”: like the infamous TV preacher who uses “blessing” to explain why he got a close parking space at the mall. “Well, look who’s blessed and highly favored today!”
- **Here in the South, we use the phrase “bless his heart” as a cover for saying whatever bad thing we wanna say about somebody.** And if you’re not from the South, you should know that. You can say anything about anybody, as long as you follow it up with “Bless his heart.” “Man, that guy is as dumb as a brick. [] [] *Bless his heart.*”
- Maybe most bizarrely, “bless you” is our go-to **when someone sneezes now**, and no one quite knows why.
  - Random people go out of their way to say it to me when I sneeze in public, and I’m always like, “Thank you!” And then I always want to follow it up by saying, **“What do YOU mean by that?”**

- Some say the tradition goes back to the **belief that your heart stops** when you sneeze, so saying “God bless you” means, “I really hope God starts your heart back up ...” Which, if that’s true, I’ll take it. But, it’s not true that your heart stops when you sneeze. Some say that when you sneeze, your soul leaves your body temporarily, so saying “bless you” is a way of warding off demons while you’re exposed like that. That’s not true either.
- **Most likely, it goes back to the sixth century**, when the Black Plague swept through the Roman empire, and sneezing was the first sign that you were sick. So Pope Gregory the First encouraged people to say “God bless you” as a prayer for divine protection against the plague when someone sneezed. I think instead of saying “Bless you,” we should just say that: “I hope that’s not the Black Death.”

But all this does raise the question: **What is blessing?** And again, had you been an independent observer of Mary’s life, *would you have called Mary “blessed”?*

I mean, **think about the circumstances of Mary’s life** when she wrote this psalm:

- **She was an unmarried, pregnant, teenage girl in a culture** where that was about the biggest scandal possible.
  - Remember, the angel Gabriel hadn’t explained Mary’s miraculous concept to everyone, only to Mary. Everyone else in the community assumed she’d been sleeping around. I mean, what else would you assume?
  - What’s more is that everybody knew she had a fiancé, Joseph, but they, as the custom was, lived completely apart for the year leading up to their marriage and didn’t really see each other that much, so people knew the baby wasn’t his—so

people assumed she wasn’t just loose; they assumed she’d betrayed Joseph.

- Joseph assumed she’d been unfaithful. Eventually, Gabriel appeared to Joseph and explained all this to him, but at the time when Mary wrote this psalm, that hadn’t happened yet. When Mary wrote this psalm, Joseph assumes he’s been betrayed, and Matthew tells us that he’s planning to break off the engagement.
- So here you’ve got young, teenaged Mary, unmarried and pregnant, her reputation ruined and her fiancé about to break up with her, **all through no fault of her own. God is the one who set this whole thing up. He could have done it any way that he wanted to do it, and he chose to do it in a way that turned Mary into a scandal. Would you have called her “blessed”?**
- **Plus, we know she was poor.** Like, really poor. We know that because the law required a Jewish couple to offer a lamb as a sacrifice after the birth of their firstborn son, but Mary and Joseph offered two turtle doves, which was a provision in the law made for the exceptionally poor who couldn’t afford the lamb required for sacrifice. Get your mind around that for a minute, will you? *Jesus was born into a family so poor they couldn’t even fulfill the law.*
- Pregnant out of wedlock, reputation ruined, fiancé about to dump her, **the poorest of the poor.** **I ask you again:** Would you have looked at Mary and called her “blessed”?
- No. She hasn’t been given a **“close parking space”** at the mall of life, has she?

**And yet,** she declares that from this point onward in her life, her reputation will be synonymous with blessing.

So why does Mary say she’s blessed? ***She points primarily to two things the birth of this baby guaranteed her:***

### **1. God’s presence was with her (vv. 46–53)**

**Notice in this psalm how intimately she speaks about God.**

**Everything in this psalm is really personal:**

- Vs. 46, He is God *MY* Savior.
- Vs. 48, He has looked *upon me*.
- Vs. 49, He has done great things *for me*.
- Vs. 52, I was lowly and he exalted *me*.
- Vs. 53, I was hungry and he fed *me*.

God was not just a power “up in the sky” to Mary. Through the birth of this baby, Mary felt **intimately connected** to God. “My God, my Savior, my help.”

## **2. (She knew that) God’s promises were for her (vv. 54–55)**

In this baby growing in her womb, Mary recognized that **God was fulfilling the promises** he had made to Abraham and his descendants many years ago. *Do you remember what those promises were? (Genesis 12) I will BLESS you and make your name great, and in you all the families of the earth will be BLESSED.*

Through the birth of this baby, Mary understood she had received that blessing, and others would call her blessed because through her, they would receive the blessing too.

So, let me say this clearly: **The blessing of God is the personal, intimate knowledge that God is with you and that he is for you.** The blessing is coming to know God like Mary did. God wants you to be blessed just like Mary was; he wants you to know him as Father as tenderly and intimately as Mary did; **he wants you to be as sure of his presence with you and his favor upon you as Mary was.**

**And let me just stop here and say:** *Some of you have never thought this was possible, to know that you know God like that.* In fact, for someone to say that they know that they know God even feels a bit

**arrogant to you.** But think with me for a minute, if you will: God describes himself as a Father; the ultimate Father. Would a good father ever want his kids to be unsure about his relationship to them? Imagine I was going on a trip and before I left, I gathered my four kids around and said, “Daddy’s got to go on a trip and will be gone for a few days. But I want you to know that I will think about you every day, and we’ll FaceTime at night, and I’ll even buy some surprises and bring them back for you when I return . . . Or maybe I’m not really your daddy at all. Maybe my real family lives somewhere else, and you’re not really even my children. Maybe this is all one big deception. Sit around and think about that while I’m gone, and let that compel you to become better children.”

“Bad” would not begin to adequately describe that kind of parenting, right? **Why would we think that’s how God is with his children?** No, God wants you to know him as tenderly as Mary did.

Three aspects of God that Mary knew intimately through the birth of this baby, that she applied to her life. She didn’t just know them here (head), she felt them here (heart). Three things you can know about God this Christmas.

**Vs. 49:** ***“... 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” (vv. 49–50).***

- In the birth of this baby, we experience firsthand, personally, a God who is **mighty, holy, and merciful.**

**Let’s start with MIGHTY:** Sometimes, I think it’s helpful just to stop and think about the sheer size and might of God. The first place we usually get a sense of this is by looking up at the night sky; Psalm 8 says *“the heavens declare the glory of God, and the skies above display HIS handiwork.”* The size of the night sky is overwhelming, and the more we know about it, the more amazing it becomes.

**Most of the stars we see when we look upward are from our own Milky Way galaxy.** They say that **if the Milky Way were the size of the entire continent of North America, our solar system would be like one coffee cup, and Earth would be the size of one speck of dust inside the cup.**<sup>2</sup> And you and I are like, what ... a microscopic speck of dust on that speck of dust?

They say that **if the Earth were the size of a golf ball, our sun would be 15 feet in diameter. You could fit 960,000 Earths inside the sun. That's enough golf balls to fill up an entire school bus, by the way.** It's also, incidentally, the number of golf balls I've lost in the woods in the half dozen or so times I've tried to play golf in the last couple of years ...

But here's the thing: Our sun is not even *that big* of a star. **Betelgeuse, another star in our galaxy, is twice the size of Earth's orbit around the sun.** Yes, you heard that right. **The diameter of Betelgeuse, they say, would stretch from our sun to Jupiter.** They say that if the Earth were a golf ball, the diameter of Betelgeuse would be the height of six Empire State Buildings stacked on top of each other. You could fit 262 trillion Earths inside Betelgeuse.

And, by the way, if you're like me, numbers like million, billion, and trillion lose their impact on you after a while. So, let me help you get your mind around that for a minute. Let's talk about the difference between "million," "billion," and "trillion." Let's start with a million seconds ago.

- Do you know when "a million seconds ago" was? One million seconds would take you back in time 11 days.
- **How about a billion seconds ago?** Do you remember what you were doing a billion seconds ago? A billion seconds ago would be around 32 years ago. For many of you, a billion seconds ago there was no "you" to speak of. It was sometime in the early 90s; we were still using floppy disks and cassette tapes, and wearing a beeper on your belt was considered cool. There were no

smartphones and kids still played outdoors! It was a strange time. That was a billion seconds ago.

- **How about a trillion seconds ago?** When do you think that would be? What's your guess—couple centuries back? A trillion seconds ago was 29,672 BC. Bill Belichick was starting his first season with the Patriots. Joe Biden and Donald Trump were hosting their first presidential debate.

**A trillion golf balls would fill up the entire Dean Smith Center,** ceiling to the roof, 6,000 times. You could put 262 trillion Earths inside of that one star, Betelgeuse. Betelgeuse isn't even the largest star, however. Not by a long shot. The largest known star is Canis Majoris. It literally means "the big dog," because that's what it is!

If the Earth were a golf ball, the diameter of Canis Majoris would be the height of Mt. Everest. **Our sun is 864,000 miles in diameter; Canis Majoris is a billion miles in diameter.** You could fit 7 quadrillion Earths in Canis Majoris. A quadrillion is a thousand trillions. In case you're curious, that's enough golf balls to cover the entire state of Texas in golf balls, 22 inches deep.

And what's more, every single second, that one star, Canis Majoris, puts out the energy equivalent of **2 million billion atom bombs.** Every single second.

And now I think of Mary, looking up into the night sky, and not understanding everything I just said, of course, but still overwhelmed by the sheer size and majesty of the heavens, and thinking that that God who created all this is the baby she now carries in her womb. A few years ago, there was a NYT bestselling author who explained that the primary objection he had to the Christian faith was the idea that a first-century carpenter living in poverty, under oppression, could have been "the uncreated Creator." I get that. Mary got that. In fact, I'd say to this skeptic, Mary beat you by 2,000 years. Mary's response to all

<sup>2</sup> *Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing, Vol. 1.*

this, vs. 34, was “*How can these things be?*” It’s mind-boggling now; it was mind-boggling then.

**But for those of you who struggle with belief, there’s actually some help for you in this, I think:** If God really is that big, can’t you leave him some space to do some things you may not entirely grasp yet? You see, *the number one reason people struggle with faith* is that there is all this seemingly pointless evil in the world. **If there’s a loving God**, they ask, how could there be so much pain and suffering?

But could you just stop and reflect, for a minute, that **if there is a God, how much bigger and grander** his plan must be than our limited understanding? The classical philosophical expression of the problem of evil goes like this: “*If God is all-powerful, he could stop suffering. If God is all-loving, he would want to stop suffering. Looking around, we see suffering, which means that there can’t be an all-loving and all-powerful God out there.*”

**But I’ve told you that formulation has a crucial, and rather obvious, missing premise:** If God is all-powerful and all-loving, it follows that he is all-wise, too; and here’s the thing: *If God’s wisdom compares to our wisdom to the same extent that his power compares to our power, why wouldn’t we allow that there are things he is doing we may not quite understand yet?*

**Think for a minute about how much greater God’s power is than yours.** He created **stars like Canis Majoris** that put out the energy of 2 million billion atom bombs every second ... The other day, I spent 10 solid minutes trying to open up a salsa jar and never succeeded. I used the little rubber grippy thing. I banged the edge with a knife. I ran it under hot water for a while. I was so mad; I didn’t know whether to throw it away or what ... I even thought, can I shatter the top in a way where I can still eat the salsa? You know, turn it upside down?

God created Canis Majoris with a word; I can’t open the salsa jar. Now, consider this: **If God’s wisdom is as high above mine as his power is above mine, isn’t it a reasonable assumption that** there are gonna be a lotta things beyond my immediate ability to understand? **I would submit to you that it is entirely possible that** God has beautiful purposes **he is working out that we just can’t see yet.**

The prophet Isaiah challenges us to step back every once in a while and just reflect on this. **Isaiah 55:** “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts,’ says the Lord. ‘For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts.’ **So why do you say in your heart, O Israel,** ‘My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God’? Have you not known? Have you not heard? **The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.** He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but those who wait upon the Lord ...”

Mary says, “Not everything in my life has worked out the way I want it to. But in this baby, I know that the God of infinite power and wisdom is with me and he is working good in my life. And even if his ways are sometimes, to me, unsearchable, I know his power is unstoppable, and so when I feel confused and alone and overwhelmed, I can trust him.”

Because, you see, and I know this is hard to grasp, but that awesome power is at work in your life right now. In fact, there’s a little poetic thing that Mary says in **vs. 51** that just overwhelms me. In **vs. 51**, Mary says that in saving me, God has shown the strength of his **ARM**. **In Psalm 8, when the psalmist talked about the majesty of the heavens, he said it was the work of God’s fingers.** To hang the moon and the stars, God used the artistry of his finger, but to save us, Mary said, God employed the strength of his arm.

**And I know it's just a metaphor, but I feel like the metaphor means something.** Even greater than the power that went into creating the universe is the power at work in your salvation and in working good in your life. **In Ephesians 1, when Paul prays for the Ephesians,** he prays they would know **"what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead."**

**The place where we see the power of God most in action, Paul said, was not** in the creation of the heavens. The heavens only took his finger. In salvation, he used his arm.

So Paul says, "I want you to feel confident in what he is doing in your life." You think that he's not faithfully working good in your life? The God who created all this is *for you*, watching over you, working out the FULL implications of his plan in your life. It may look different than you think it should, but that's just because he's so much wiser than you. But do you actually think he'll fail? I can assure you: HE WON'T.

I love how Sally Lloyd-Jones, the author of the kids book *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, says it: **"When God promises to bless you, he is saying, 'I'm going to make you into everything I've ever meant for you to be. It means that God is taking every day and every single thing that happens in it—good or bad—to make you stronger, to mend whatever is broken inside, to change you into the person you were always meant to be.'"**<sup>3</sup>

That's the hope you have, even in your suffering, this morning. He has not, and will not ever, fail in *doing this*. **And that brings us to the second dimension of God that Mary highlighted, vs. 49, again: his HOLINESS: "... for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name ..."**

**HOLY.** To Jewish people, holy meant "perfect." Completely trustworthy. We even get our English word "holy" from the word "whole." *Whole; complete; without imperfection.*

Pagan gods of the time were not holy; Greek and Roman gods were notorious for their self-serving behavior. Zeus, for example, it was believed, often took on human form so he could seduce women. And Juno, his wife, was capricious and vindictive; she inflicted plagues on the earth because she was mad that Zeus had cheated on her.

**But the true God isn't like that, Mary said.** "He's holy. He's totally free from selfishness or vindictiveness. He's faithful and pure and always keeps his promises; he always acts out of love. And so I can trust him!" she says.

**The holiness of God is the foundation of our hope;** a God of immeasurable power always acts faithfully, always from love, and always keeps his promises.

But God's holiness also presents a problem for us—because, you see, we are not holy. We're more like Zeus and Juno. Our lives are filled with selfishness and anger and vindictiveness and greed. And that presents the greatest dilemma of the Bible. ***We long to be known and loved by a holy God. But how can a completely holy God have real fellowship, real connection, with unholy people?***

The prophet Habakkuk says, **"You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and you cannot look at wrong" (Habakkuk 1:13).** This verse doesn't mean that God can't physically see sin, of course; no, the word here for **"see"** means to dwell on it, to fellowship with it. Think of it like you being forced to watch something morally repulsive, like the abuse of a child or something. It's not that you can't see it. You have to turn away from it. It's repulsive.

<sup>3</sup> *Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing*, Sally Lloyd-Jones, Loc. 24.

God cannot fellowship with our sin and we are filled with it. I mean, think about how much impurity, and selfishness, and vindictiveness drive our behavior.

- Imagine that you had a little monitor attached to the side of your head that displayed whatever you were thinking at any given moment, so that people could see exactly what you're thinking at any given moment. How many of you would have any friends left by the end of the day?
- Or the old Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer used to say: Imagine you had a little invisible recorder hung around your neck that turned on only when you said the word "ought" or "should"—"he ought to do that" or "they should be like this"—and it recorded you saying that, and then on judgment day, it played back just those things and judged you by that. Would anybody survive that judgment? We fail dramatically even by our own "oughts" and "shoulds."

**How can a holy God live inside Mary?** How can a holy God unite himself to humanity? How can the Spirit of that God live inside of us and fellowship with us and make us his forever? **Vs. 34: How can these things be?**

And that brings us to the **third characteristic of God** that Mary highlights: "... 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" (vv. 49–50).

**Write down "MERCIFUL."** The word for "mercy" in Hebrew is "rachoom," and we often translate it as "compassion."

And what it means is that God felt two conflicting emotions with respect to us. The first was righteous anger, the kind of disgust we'd feel looking at something morally repulsive. The second was mercy. And God, the Bible writers say, chose to let his compassion overpower his wrath.

In **Psalm 103:13**, King David said, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him."

**That word translated "compassion" is "rachoom," the same word for mercy:** When I see one of my kids suffer, there's an emotion that takes over, where if I could take their pain from them into myself, I would. Even if their suffering is their own fault. Especially if their suffering is their own fault! I think, "If I could take this pain away from them, I would."

This is how God feels about his children. He chose to take our pain into himself, and so in mercy he sent Jesus, his Son, to unite himself to fallen humanity and literally absorb into himself the guilt of our sin, so that we could be delivered from it.

**On the cross, God made him who knew no sin** to become sin for us. **The one who was perfectly holy took into his own body** our sin, so that we could be delivered from it.

Mighty, Holy, and Merciful. Mary says, I know this God; he is mine and I am his. A God of infinite might, perfect holiness, and extravagant mercy. This is the God who has united himself to me—and his presence and his promise are enough for me. In him, I have enough and I am enough. **And that is my blessing. I am #blessed.**

**So, let me end this with three reflections:**

**1. Even if it "doesn't feel like Christmas," in Christ, you can be fully blessed**

It didn't feel like Christmas for Mary, but she had Jesus, and he was enough. This can be your hope this morning, if you receive it. The hope is that even in the darkness, you have an all-powerful, holy, and merciful God that is working faithfully for you.



One of my favorite Christmas carols is “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” It’s not as well-known as some of the others, but it was written 161 years ago on Christmas Day, by a 57-year-old widow named Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.<sup>4</sup> It was right in the midst of the Civil War, and Henry Longfellow’s wife had just tragically died—he had awakened from a nap one afternoon to the sounds of his wife screaming in the next room; her dress had somehow caught on fire as she’d been working around the fireplace. He tried to extinguish the flames, first using a rug and then by trying to smother it with his own body, but it was too late; she was already too badly burned. His own burns from trying to rescue her were so bad that he couldn’t even attend her funeral. **He’d also just gotten word that his son Charley, a soldier in the Union Army, had been shot through the back and neck in a recent battle and they weren’t sure if he was going to make it, and doctors said that if he did make it, he’d likely be paralyzed.**

Longfellow sat by his window that cold Christmas morning, bereaved husband and worried father, his country torn apart by the Civil War, and in the distance he heard church bells ringing out, proclaiming Christmas “peace on earth, good will to men!” And yet, as Longfellow looked out at his broken country, all he saw was violence and loss, and as he looked down at his own life, all he felt was sadness and despair.

***“And in despair I bowed my head; ‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said; ‘For hate is strong, And mocks the song, of peace on earth, good will to men.’”***

But as he sat there, he did that thing that you have to do where he pressed through the pain into the promises of God, and then wrote these next words: ***“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: ‘God is not dead, nor doth he sleep; The wrong shall fail, the Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men.’”***

<sup>4</sup> See, “The True Story Behind ‘I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,’” by Justin Taylor. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-story-of-pain-and-hope-behind-i-heard-the-bells-on-christmas-day/>

That’s defiant. It’s believing in God’s promises in the midst of the darkness. Mary’s Magnificat has that same defiant, triumphant tone to it. The Romans are still in charge; my personal reputation is in ruins. I’m poor and it looks like my fiancé has abandoned me. But I have his presence and his promises. “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: *‘God is not dead, nor doth he sleep; The wrong shall fail, the Right prevail. (He is working good in my life. In him I am truly blessed. And so, I can know ...)* ***there’s peace on earth, good-will to men.’”***

*Reflection 2:*

## **2. Many of you need to hear that God is “looking at you in mercy” this Christmas**

Many of you have a sense that God is angry at you, and maybe you have legitimate reason to think so. You know a holy God sees all the ways you fall short. The good news is that God has chosen to let his mercy overcome his wrath.

He looked at you like the best father does with a child and felt tenderness in his heart toward you, a tenderness that overcame his wrath. And he extended salvation to you ... *For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.*

But here’s the thing: You have to choose that for yourself. He won’t force it on you. Did you notice how Mary said, **vs. 50, “his mercy is for those who fear him”?** *For those who will hear him and believe him and surrender to him.* You don’t have to earn his mercy. You can’t earn it. But you do have to receive it.

Mary’s response to all this was, ***“Be it unto me according to your word.”*** That’s maybe the greatest salvation prayer ever uttered. “Be it

unto me according to your word.” “The mercy and salvation you have declared over me, I receive it!” Will you say that to God this morning?

God is looking at you right now in mercy. Many of you feel cold and distant toward God this morning, but that’s because you think he feels cold and distant toward you. You assume you’ve got to get better and improve before he’ll be happy with you. Maybe your parents were like that. They only approved of you when you were perfect. The gospel is that he sees you in all of your mess, all of your dysfunction and your sin, and accepts you. He cares about you. He’s let his mercy overcome his wrath and he receives you, if you will accept his offer of salvation. **Will you say to him,** “Be it unto me according to your word”?

*Last reflection:*

### 3. Don’t reduce Christmas to sentimentality

So many people reduce Christmas to a time of sentimentality. We think the real meaning of Christmas is goodwill and niceness, feelings that don’t last through the day after Christmas when the cruelty of life takes back over. No wonder people get so skeptical about Christmas.

Mary’s song was not sentimental. Her life was a mess. Her song was not about family love and lights and delightful smells around the open fire. Her song was about the fact that a God of infinite might, holiness, and mercy had taken up residence in her without any of those things.

**Listen: Either she was right about this or she wasn’t.** Don’t insult Mary by turning her into a quaint religious figure that reminds us of family and warmth and sentimental vibes. Either Mary was correct that the baby growing inside of her was “God of very God,” sent as the Savior of the world to die on a cross and overcome death and right all injustice in the world, or she wasn’t. Because, see, that was her whole hope.

Stop this patronizing nonsense about this all being a sentimental religious tale. It’s not that. Mary’s hope was not sentimentality. It was God with us, having come in salvation.

Mary would watch one day as this Son was crucified. And as painful as that was for her to watch, she believed he was doing that for her sin and for the sin of the whole world. This was her hope. He cared about her even more than she cared about him. And in the midst of a cruel, unjust world, this was her hope.

So again, stop with this patronizing nonsense that this is a quaint religious story to make us feel sentimental. Either this hope is true or it isn’t.

**The Christmas claim is that God has come to earth for you.** He’s declared mercy to you, if you’ll receive it. Have you ever said to him, “Be it unto me according to your word?”

**Heads bowed, if you will ... two groups I want to talk to:**

- If you’ve never accepted Christ personally as your Lord and Savior, or you’re not sure you have, I want to give you a chance to do that right now! God has declared mercy to you, but you have to receive it. The forgiveness of all your sins, a free gift—but you have to turn away from your sin and receive it as your own. If you’re not sure that you’ve ever done that and want to, I’m going to give you a prayer to pray, and I want you to pray along with me. You can use these words, but they have to come from your heart: “Jesus, I believe you died for my sin, and I receive that as my own. Be it unto me according to your word. I accept you as my Lord, and I surrender myself to you.” How many prayed that? Raise hands. *(Here’s what I want you to do: Take out your phone and **text READY to 33933.**)* “Ready,” indicating you’re ready to follow Jesus, and we’ll follow up with you in the new year and give you some next steps.

- **Second group:** We have people here who are suffering. Can you say, “God, I know you are for me. And this morning, I will rest under the wings of a God who is mighty, holy, and merciful. Even in the darkness of pain and loss, like Mary, I know I am fully blessed in him. *Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine ...*”?

Just rest and rejoice in that for a moment, and then at all our campuses, our worship teams will come ...