

# Christmas Unmasked

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*It must have been sad to be the Lone Ranger. Have you ever thought about that? What would it have been like to be the Lone Ranger? To live all your life with a mask, nobody could ever see who you really were, what you really held inside. It must have been sad to be the Lone Ranger when he died. If you were to ask anyone about him, they may have been thankful for his service, and yet, all they could say was "Who was that masked man?"*

This fictional series finds a connection with our non-fictional lives. We too can know a kind of masked living and prospect of loneliness. If only the Lone Ranger had found liberty to take his mask off and let people know who he was. What joy there may have been in knowing the life behind the mask. What potential joy for you and for others to see behind your mask and witness the wonders of what God has done.

In Luke 1:46-55, Mary, in response to the promise and work of God in her life, hallows the Lord. And as she does, we are confronted with a God who intends in His grace to pull off the masks we so easily fight to keep on. There is perhaps no greater time to reflect on this than at Christmas. The Christmas holidays like no other time of the year can, amid the laughter and friendship, expose an uncomfortable reality. We have to interact with people we usually do not have to interact with. We see family members we do not normally see. Many of these relationships can be difficult or strained. And we can be tempted to put the mask on, smile our Christmas smile, and pretend that everything is better than it really is.

We know that when Christmas is over and the music has died down, we will go back to the same life that we lived before the songs began. Regret as to joys hindered and forgiveness restrained can haunt us with things we wished we had said or did not say to God or to our families. How do we move beyond this temptation to pick up the mask, to an authentic and living joy before God in the presence of men and women this season? In Mary's song an answer begins to unfold.

## The Mask of Religion

Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk. 1:46,47). As Mary proclaims these words she is privately in a house and speaking from her soul about the nature of the God she worships. She is not going through a religious exercise in order to look good in front of other people. She is crying out from her heart to God. And this heart religion demonstrated by Mary encompasses both doctrine and the experience of that doctrine.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary says. On Mary's mind is the objective person and reality of the God of Israel. And Mary magnifies this truth about God. What does a magnifying glass do? It enlarges the object under its gaze. It does not create anything new: rather, it enlarges what is already there in order that it may be more clearly seen. Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord." By doing so, she views her soul as a magnifier

bringing what is true about the majesty and promise of her God to a larger clarity and vision before the eyes of her thoughts.

But she does not stop with these larger views of the objective realities of her God. She goes further. She says, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices." What Mary hallows births in her an experience of joy. Mary actually experiences the doctrine of God that she magnifies. Contemplation of God brings a rush of rejoicing to our souls.

This balance between the knowledge of doctrine and the experience of doctrine takes down the mask of lifeless religion. One kind of Christian is very concerned that we know doctrine, that we know the truth. He is concerned that faith is not based merely on experience and likewise that modern worship is not made into entertainment; and such a fellow is right. But, we who are as these must beware lest we become so afraid of living heresy, that we daily and inwardly decay in our orthodoxy.

And then there is the other side. Those of us who are afraid of this decay and want to experience God. We want practice and application and are afraid of an academic mentality with reference to walking with God. And it is right to guard against such deadness. But, beloved, our experience must be rooted in truth. Doctrine matters. A person can feel a lot of things, but the feeling can be rooted in lies.

Mary's voice shows that we can no longer hide our minds from our hearts, nor our hearts from our minds. This means that there is a story to be known and understood this Christmas as well as a story that is to be experienced by us in our own souls. If we find ourselves unaware of the truth of this Christmas story let us no longer settle for the enjoyment of merely singing "What Child is this?" Let us, rather, move on to see the reality of the doctrinal truth behind the song. And if we find our souls numb to the truths we sing, let us then fall in our quiet moments to beg God to breathe life into our dry bones. The result of such masks being pulled off will be nothing less than fullness of joy as truth ravishes the soul this Christmas season.

## The Masks of Insulation and Isolation

Now notice that Mary is in the presence of Elizabeth. Mary's worship, though a response of her own soul to God, is not merely a private response. She worships Him unveiled in the presence of another. She cannot hold it in!

When a builder puts insulation between the beams of a wall, he does so to keep the temperature and the sound from leaking out. For some reason, we too, can become like insulation, expressing our lives in such a way that the inward heat and sound of God's grace within us is never allowed to leak out into public. We may even try to become insulatory toward others, keeping them from leaking out their experience of truth by our frowns or our words.

But Mary's voice pulls off our insulation so that inward sounds of praise are heard. But how does she do this? Perhaps a hint for us is given by noticing where Mary's thoughts are. Mary addresses God personally. She says of Him, "God my Savior," "holy is His name." As you read through this passage she keeps telling you of what God has done in her life and in the life of His people. She speaks of God's strength, of God's mercy, of God's faithfulness in history, of God's promises, and of God's mighty works. But even this, though it gives us the root of overflowing praise as found in the contemplation of God, is just the beginning of pulling off our insulation.

Mary is responding to God's gracious intrusion into her life and world. This is what Mary has said. God, she

says, is her Savior. It's not just that Mary has known God. More fundamental is the penetrating earthquake of soul that comes from recognizing that God has known Mary. Even more, God has known His promises for a people who were in His thoughts from all eternity. She who was without salvation if left to herself, was found by Him.

I do not know why it is, but the longer we are in Christian circles, the more plastic we can become. Shouldn't the Gospel turn our heart fleshy? Shouldn't we weep more and laugh more and fall on our knees more? Why is it that we can become more and more plastic? I think it is simply because we forget we have been saved and being saved means that we are sinners. Mary, by God's grace, calls out and admits that the Lord is her Savior. She needed a savior just like us.

We, who like Mary were dead, are by His grace through faith brought to life. This is the substance of Mary's recognition of the redeemer who is coming. God has remembered mercy (vs. 54).

Such contemplations of salvation pull off our insulation so that our inward praise of God flows into public. It is this public expression of soul-enlarging worship that compels us into a community with other like-souls who feel the thunder of like-contemplations. Some will respond to this movement of soul before God by trying to insulate your heart and keep your inward praise quiet. There is no doubt that such a move has often turned us painfully toward quiet isolation. But there are always Elizabeths in our lives who will rejoice with us and sing the praises of our God.

### The Mask of Religious Merit

But some of us may feel, still, that we carry no worth that God should be mindful of us. Conversely, some of us believe that it is exactly our status and position that has God's attention. But, when we hear Mary's voice, the pride of both assumptions is challenged. After all, who is Mary? About how old is she? If you find yourself tempted to pride because of your doctrinal knowledge or religious reputation, remember that these eternal truths in Luke chapter one are poured out of the heart of a teenager. This teenager declares truths about God that are so deep that even masters of divinity have to bow before them. And yet, it is not as if Mary herself was in her blessedness beyond us. Mary does not say, "God has come to me so I must be great. I must really be something, Elizabeth!" But Mary profoundly said, "God has regarded the lowly estate of a maid."

In verse 52 Mary says, "He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly." Where are the rabbis and chief priests? Do they hear the voice of God? No, a young girl from nowhere hears the voice of God. The issue this Christmas is not about your status or power to provide. You may feel like a failure. You may feel like you are failing because you have not achieved according to your expectations or the expectations of others. Or maybe you feel that because you have achieved, as long as you maintain your performance level, God and others will accept you. But, beloved, the good news of the Gospel is that God accepts you on the basis of Christ, on the basis of His status and accomplishments, not on the basis of yours.

Our masks of religious merit are taken off and the wrinkles on our faces made visible by God and for God's glory. Some of you may watch *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* this Christmas season. Near the end of the story is an island of misfit toys annually forgotten and unwanted because they are broken. When you see that island, remember that you, like me, are broken misfits who have been rescued and made useful again. He, who far from coming to us in a fictitious sleigh, came truthfully to a bloody cross; and, with the name that is above every name, He became like you, regarding your lowly estate, that like Him, you too, would rise again. And off, therefore, come the masks of religious merit.

## The Mask of Happiness Through Circumstances

Not so many years ago, my wife and I visited one very dear to us at Christmastime. Circumstances were hard and this dear man was alone on Christmas. For him, the lights and the songs only brought up difficult memories of the pain caused by his own sin, and the sin of others. For him, songs of Christmas, far from bringing hope of life, brought only a reminder of loss. Maybe you or someone you love will hear such sad songs this Christmas. But won't you, for a moment, remember why it was that Mary was at Elizabeth's house? She was there because she had been sent away. Nobody believed her. Initially, not even Joseph believed her. Her community, those with whom she has laughed and cried, learned, and loved, threatened to stone her to death. It is amid this cruel loss of trust and love and friendship that Mary is crying out this beautiful prayer to God.

There is a myth living among us at Christmas. It is the myth that joy comes because everything is perfect around the tree. But the Gospel truth is that in Christ, joy flourishes through tears in the midst of the world's rejection.

Mary was rejected by men, but not by God. You may go to be with your family this holiday season and some of your family members may mock you because of your faith in Christ. They may say hurtful things about you. Likewise at work people may challenge your decisions. And it will hurt. But there is more to life than the affirmations and the critique of men.

Not too many years after this first "Christmas," Mary, then grown, would face a crowd at the cross who would mock a poor crying mother, weeping for her son. But in the end, beloved, she will be the one who stands in the presence of God vindicated. Many of those who gloated that day with death in their voice will, in a coming day, hear, "Depart from me! I never knew you." And Mary whose soul magnified the Lord amid a life she did not plan, and a loss more painful than she could have imagined, this Mary will hear, "Come Mary, enter my rest."

It must have been sad to be the Lone Ranger. Some of us know this sadness all too well as we contemplate life this Christmas season. But oh, the freedom Lone Rangers can know through the grace of God in Christ. This grace enables us to live meaningfully, even with visible scars on our faces. It enables us to worship God and rest secure in Him regardless of our status in life. And it gives us a joy that does not come from picture-perfect circumstances. May this Christmas season be a time for you to feel the masks you wear begin to loosen as you realize the grace of God in Christ.

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