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FROM THE MINISTRY OF

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**THRU**the**BIBLE**

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THE REAL SONGS OF  
*Christmas*

**DR. J. VERNON MCGEE**

# THE REAL SONGS OF CHRISTMAS

*Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."*

*And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth 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 on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of*

***their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. 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 our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.*** –Luke 1:39-55

Before the story of shepherds and angels, there was this story. Together they provide a proper perspective of the real Christmas story.

Luke was the only one who recorded the real songs of Christmas. He wrote the Beatitude of Elizabeth, the Magnificat of Mary, the Benedictus of Zacharias, the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon, the Evangel of the angel, and the Gloria in Excelsis of the angelic host. We are going to consider the first two of those songs, the Beatitude of Elizabeth and the Magnificat of Mary.

After the angel Gabriel brought the message of redeeming love and the remembered joyful concern of God for man—first to Zacharias, then to Mary, and then to Joseph—it was time for man to respond. It was time for man to break forth in song—only it was the women who broke forth in song. And as our story unfolds, you will see that essentially it is one woman’s story.

Before we settle in at Bethlehem, let’s travel to Nazareth and get the story I believe is the background for all the momentous events of the Incarnation.

It’s naturally assumed that when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, she immediately traveled south to the hill country of Judah to visit with her relatives, Zacharias and Elizabeth.

May I say to you that it may not have happened that way. Perhaps after Gabriel appeared to Mary, she remained in Nazareth. Then Gabriel appeared to Joseph. Since they were engaged, and the engagement was as binding as marriage in that day, Joseph would consummate that engagement by the marriage ceremony.

But Nazareth became hostile. Good people shunned Mary. They avoided her. She saw only unsympathetic eyes that shot out cold glances of rebuke at her. It was a field day for gossips. Whispers, rumors, and suspicion all around. Someone has said that God made the country, man made the city, but the devil made the little town—and Nazareth was a little town, and people there *talked*. There was no sympathetic understanding of her position, and she couldn't explain it. What could she say?

If you had lived in Nazareth in that day, would you have believed her? Of course not. I likely wouldn't have, either.

Now this young woman wanted to get out of Nazareth. Mary didn't want pity. She longed for sympathy, and she needed a place where she could think. After all, a tremendous thing was happening to her. She needed human help, someone to talk to, someone who would listen to her with understanding.

Who was there better to do that than Elizabeth? The angel Gabriel had already told Mary about her:

***“Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren.”*** –Luke 1:36

Elizabeth was six months along by that time; John the Baptist was to be born within three months or less. But the interesting thing is, Zacharias couldn't speak, since he was made dumb by unbelief. He likely wrote out what he had to say to Mary, but Elizabeth did the talking. And what sweet fellowship they would have together. The coming together of these mothers is one of the loveliest meetings ever recorded.

***Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*** –Luke 1:39-41

Notice the greeting. Now I can't explain this. We live in a day when even those who claim to believe the Bible like to find a natural explanation.

Some years ago, a Christian astronomer tried to explain how the guiding star that first Christmas appeared. He said it was the coming together of Venus and Jupiter. But he would be hard pressed to explain how that star led the wise men from Jerusalem down to Bethlehem. The only explanation of the Christmas story is that it's supernatural. You either believe it or not, which means either you believe God, or you don't. He has laid it right out there for the unbelieving world today.

When Mary arrives unannounced and enters Zacharias and Elizabeth's home, she calls out a greeting, and the baby—as Elizabeth said—leaps for joy in her womb! Elizabeth, at least six months pregnant, hurries to greet Mary, knowing what God is preparing to do, and she's filled with the Holy Spirit. The baby leaps with joy, and he is filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb!

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognized that under Mary's heart was forming the humanity of Jesus, the Savior. The Son of God was being formed there, and Mary was the earthly tabernacle. As Elizabeth called her, "The mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43).

Mary was just a tabernacle. Back in the days of the tabernacle of old, the children of Israel didn't believe they were to worship it, and they didn't. Later, once they had built the temple, they didn't worship it, either. They worshiped the One who met with them in the temple. Elizabeth didn't worship Mary. She said to her, "Blessed are you *among* women," not above women. Just because Mary brought the Savior into the world didn't put her on a pedestal, but she lifted up all womanhood and all motherhood! The Christmas story is a woman's story. A man had nothing to do with it.



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# THE BEATITUDE OF ELIZABETH

With these words, Elizabeth was the first to worship the Savior—and He hadn't even yet been born! Elizabeth burst into the first song of worship:

***Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"*** –Luke 1:42, 43

Mary needed help. This tremendous, indescribable, and delicate thing had overwhelmed her.

Elizabeth is carrying in her womb the last prophet of the Old Testament dispensation, the last voice, John the Baptist. What a voice he was! "Prepare the way!" he thundered. Here was his answer on one occasion:

***John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."***  
–Luke 3:16

When they came to John the Baptist later on and said, “You are fading, and He’s increasing,” he answered, “That’s the way it should be—He must increase but I must decrease.”

But here at the very beginning we see Elizabeth, John’s mother, worshiping the One who will usher in the new dispensation. She sings the first song of worship, this beatitude, and it’s lovely. “Blessed is the fruit of your womb”—that is, *“Blessed is this little one who is coming into the world! And you, Mary, are His tabernacle, the mother of my Lord.”*

You don’t go in on Sunday to worship the church, do you? It may be a lovely auditorium, but you don’t worship the building. You worship the Savior who is to be proclaimed in His church. But give Elizabeth credit for that also, for that’s exactly what she’s doing.

***“For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.”*** –Luke 1:44, 45

Little is said in Scripture about Elizabeth. She sang the first song of the New Testament, and when you have a soloist like this, you shouldn’t ignore her. She’s a remarkable person. She had faith while her husband Zacharias did not. He was struck silent because of his unbelief, but Elizabeth was not. She believed God. Now she encourages Mary. Mary is a young woman and Elizabeth is old. Elizabeth had walked with God for many years, and she assures Mary there would be a performance of those things which had been revealed to her. Let’s give Elizabeth a little credit along with the others. Mary needed encouragement and God provided a trusted, mature woman to give it to her.



# THE MAGNIFICAT OF MARY

Mary responds to Elizabeth's encouragement with her own song, known as the Magnificat. The entire Magnificat breathes the Old Testament. The one who gave this was obviously well acquainted with the Old Testament. Mary knew the Scriptures.

***And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed."*** –Luke 1:46-48

Mary's song teaches us several interesting things. First, she acknowledges that she needs a Savior and that she rejoices in Him. Protestant friend, let us call her blessed. We don't make her a goddess and kneel before her, but we do need to call her blessed. It was her glorious privilege to be the mother of the Son of God, to bring Him into the world. We don't need to play it up, but we shouldn't play it down, either. She was a wonderful person, and it was no accident that God chose her. It was His definite decision, and He makes no mistakes.

Now let's listen closely to her remarkable song. She begins:

***"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."*** –Luke 1:46, 47

Mary needed a Savior as much as you and I need a Savior, and at the conclusion she sings,

***“He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy.”***

–Luke 1:54

God saves us by mercy. Mercy means a holy God’s hands are unshackled today because Christ came in love and died. And it’s “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Mary needed God’s mercy as much as we do. She speaks of it here in the Magnificat.

Mary’s final note is this:


***“As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.”***

–Luke 1:55

What a remarkable statement. Mary refers all the way back—past all of the kings of the Old Testament, back further than David, back beyond Moses—to the time when God called a man from Ur of the Chaldees, saying, *“I’ll do three things for you Abraham, if you will believe Me. First of all, I’m going to give you a land. Second, I’m going to bring from you a nation. And third, I’m going to make you a blessing to all people.”* And when this man offered up his boy, Isaac, from whom was to come that line (that is, “the seed”), God again renewed these promises to him:

***“In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”*** –Genesis 22:18

There in Judah’s hill country, in Zacharias and Elizabeth’s home, Mary utters this tremendous song, this Magnificat, “My soul magnifies the Lord!” She reaches back into the Old Testament and takes God’s promise to Abraham and says, *“It’s now being fulfilled!”* What a glorious privilege she had. No wonder her soul could magnify the Lord!



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# THE REBUKE OF THE MANGER

Then the day came. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Mary gave birth to “her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

Men have tried from that day to this to establish certain geographical spots and make them famous. They’ve erected monuments all over this world. One of the most famous is a little manger. Today some people almost worship that manger, and they put a little doll in it as though that’s where Christ is.

Now, don’t misunderstand, that manger is a wonderful thing, but it reveals something of Mary. She didn’t put Jesus in that manger so we could use it in our Christmas songs and pageants. She put Him there because she was practical. The manger was a convenient, safe place for a newborn.

God made no mistake in picking that couple to be Jesus’ earthly parents. Joseph never found fault or whined. Mary doesn’t criticize God for not providing a golden cradle for Jesus. He deserved to have one, but Mary did the best she could, without complaint. That’s the message of Christmas.

My friend, that little manger rebukes us today. Go into any store during the holiday season, and you will be overwhelmed with *things!* That manger tells something about this affluent society today where we have so many things—all in celebration of the little One who came to tell us that *things* really don't amount to anything! My friend, if things had been necessary, if a palace and amenities befitting a king were essential for character and the development of human life, then God would have provided them. He omitted them to show they aren't necessary.

*Things* just don't count. That's what this little manger is still telling us. Mary wrapped Him and put Him in that rough manger because it was practical, and it was all she had. And that's all the Son of God needed. What a great lesson for us.

# THE WORSHIP OF JESUS

Now, let's go back to Jerusalem where God broke through for the Christmas story.

A priest was serving at an altar of incense in the Temple. With that altar of incense were three articles of furniture in the holy place that speak of worship. Zacharias was in there worshipping God through his prayers for a son. But you must remember the priest had come by the brazen altar, which speaks of the cross of Christ. Blood had been offered there. If you want to worship Jesus today, it's not to Bethlehem you should go, but to Golgotha. Not to a manger, but to a cross. The cross should be in Christmas. The birth and the death of Christ come in one package, all wrapped in swaddling clothes—for when they crucified Him, they removed His garments.

Yes, "Mary had a little Lamb." I'm not being irreverent when I say that. John the Baptist says, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Isaiah said, "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). Yonder on the cross is when He looked down at Mary and said, "Woman, behold your son!" (John 19:26). In other words, *"The cloud of suspicion and shame*

*you went under at Nazareth is going to be forever removed. I'll be back from the dead in three days.*" And He literally is "declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4).

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# THE GIFT IS FOR YOU

***All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way ....*** –Isaiah 53:6

If you would ask me what's wrong with the human family, I would point to those three words: "his own way." They describe the trouble today with the world, each one going his own way.

***There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.*** –Proverbs 14:12

But when you come His way—not to the cradle, but to the cross—and accept and receive Christ Jesus as Savior, you receive the gift that came on that first Christmas day, wrapped in swaddling clothes. "And heaven comes down our souls to greet, and glory crowns the mercy seat," we sing in the old hymn. No wonder Mary, this peasant girl out of Nazareth, could say, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."

These two remarkable women, Elizabeth and Mary, simply believed God and worshiped this One,


***Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*** –Philippians 2:6-11

Oh, that you and I might also *worship* Jesus with the real song of Christmas!

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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