

Alistair Begg

Christmas
Playlist

Four songs that bring you to
the heart of Christmas

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Four songs that bring you to the heart of Christmas

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Contents

Introduction: <i>Christmas is Coming</i>	5
1. Mary's Song: <i>What is God Like?</i>	9
2. Zechariah's Song: <i>Why do You Need God?</i>	19
3. The Angels' Song: <i>How did God Come?</i>	31
4. Simeon's Song: <i>How did God do it?</i>	41
Conclusion: <i>Once in Royal David's City...</i>	55

Introduction

Christmas is Coming

Nobody announces that the Christmas season has begun. They just change the music in the stores and in the mall.

All of a sudden, you realize that you're walking through the mall to the tune of something deeply profound like "Jingle Bells" or "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" or "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." Or maybe it's something more religious, a Christmas carol like "Once In Royal David's City" or "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

The change of music indicates that Christmas is coming. And when Christmas is coming, there is a lot to do to get ready. So the sentimental songs and the cheesy songs and the religious songs just wash over you throughout December. They are on the radio as you make gingerbread. They are on the commercials that remind you of all the presents you

haven't bought yet. They are on your playlist when you have friends over. And then, all of a sudden, it's Christmas Eve, as if the whole month has collapsed over you... and Christmas happens and then it's all over, and the songs in the stores and the mall go back to normal because it's January.

The other sign the Christmas season has begun is the appearance of nativity scenes in various places. In many ways I love them—they're a helpful reminder of what Christmas is all about, even if Mary always looks remarkably un-exhausted for someone who has just given birth, and the animals look surprisingly un-bothered at being kept from their feeding trough.

But at the same time I have a concern about nativity scenes—because I think there is a danger that they end up trivializing what they're picturing. They tend to sentimentalize the scene. We can just look at it and go, *Abh, that's sweet. I like Christmas.* But there's nothing in it that arrests you. There's nothing there to deal with, that makes us think, that sets us back on our heels. There's nothing that says: *Listen.*

Not the Usual Christmas Songs

This book is about Christmas songs, and it invites you to peer at a nativity scene. But not the songs that wash over us, or a scene we can sentimentalize. This book takes us back to the four songs of the first Christmas, which were heard before, during

and after the birth of the baby who lies at the heart of the real Christmas. That's the program.

We are going to be looking at the Gospel of Luke, one of the four historical accounts of Jesus in the Bible. And Luke, a doctor writing within living memory of the events he describes, punctuates the story of the birth of Jesus with a series of songs. He doesn't give us these songs, or poems, for them to wash over us, but for them to change us. This is a playlist that helps us to prepare for Christmas properly, and to celebrate Christmas joyfully.

Before we get into them, it is worth looking at the way in which Luke introduces his Gospel:

¹Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

(Luke chapter 1, verses 1-4)

Luke clearly wants it to be understood that he is reporting facts. He isn't coming up with some kind of mythological story to foist upon his friend,

Theophilus, and all of the readers throughout history. He is introducing facts—staggering facts, but facts nevertheless. Luke introduces himself to us as a historian, as somebody who is very, very careful to do his investigation. He has made his investigations in order to provide sufficient basis for this individual, Theophilus—and others like Theophilus—to come to an absolute certainty regarding who Jesus is, why Jesus has come, what he has done and why it all actually matters.

Luke offers these events to us not as poetical speculation, but as pure history. That will raise the stakes for you as you read this book. Considering these events will take more thought than subconsciously humming “Jingle Bells” or idly glancing at a nativity scene—but it will be far more rewarding too. It will prove challenging and liberating, for we are considering not a sweet baby who never says anything, but the one of whom it was claimed that he was the Son of God.

I love the story of an archbishop talking to Jane Fonda, the actress. At some point the archbishop says, “Jane, Jesus is the Son of God.” And she says, “Well, he may be the Son of God for you, but he isn’t the Son of God for me.” To which the archbishop replies, “Jane, either he is, or he isn’t.”

Either he is, or he isn’t. My aim in this short book is to show you that he is, and why that is wonderful news for you.

1. *Mary's Song*

What is God Like?

What do you think about when you think about God? Which words come into your mind?

All of us have some view of God. Perhaps you think he is non-existent, or distant, or everywhere, or loving or angry or fluffy or faithful. Perhaps that view is based on an internal hunch or feeling, or on what your family believed, or on what a book or one sage or another says.

Some people expend great mental energy wrestling with the question of the reality and nature of God. Others of us give it no more than a passing thought. Whichever category we're in, everyone thinks something about God—and lots of us think different things about him.

So the question is: How do we know that we've got it right?

Imagine if you had an experience, an encounter, that enabled everything to click into place, so that you weren't just guessing, but really, truly did know about God: whether he is there and what he is like. It would be phenomenal. And it's exactly that kind of experience which kicks off most nativity plays, and which sparks the first song in Luke's account of the first Christmas—a song which gives us two words that describe the God who is really there.

This is Mary's song—a song inspired by her role in the events of the first Christmas, but in which she doesn't sing about herself, but about God. It's a song that pours out from a heart bursting with emotion.

Extraordinary Meets Ordinary

The story behind the song is familiar. The angel Gabriel has made his famous visit to Nazareth to speak to this young girl. So the background is a combination of the natural and the supernatural, the interweaving of the very ordinary and the clearly extraordinary. A lady is going to have a baby. That is ordinary news. The baby is going to be conceived by God himself. That is extraordinary news. The announcement is made by an angel sent from heaven. That is supernatural. But then Mary responds in a very natural way: *I need to go and talk to someone about this.* And so Mary “got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,” where she goes to the home of Zechariah and her relative,

Elizabeth (Luke 1 v 39-40). Elizabeth is decades older, and she is pregnant too. And so now we have a kind of girl's night in. Today they would have watched a movie and had popcorn and felt each other's tummies and talked about it and said, *What are you going to do about getting a crib?* and all that kind of stuff.

And it is while Mary is with Elizabeth that she breaks out in song, the first Christmas song in history:

- ⁴⁶*My soul glorifies the Lord*
⁴⁷*and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*
⁴⁸*for he has been mindful*
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹*for the Mighty One has done great things for me—*
holy is his name.
⁵⁰*His mercy extends to those who fear him,*
from generation to generation.
⁵¹*He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;*
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts.
⁵²*He has brought down rulers from their thrones*
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³*He has filled the hungry with good things*
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴*He has helped his servant Israel,*
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵*to Abraham and his descendants forever,*
just as he promised our ancestors. (Luke 1 v 46-55)

Mindful of Me

Notice that Mary speaks initially in terms which are personal: “For he [that is, God] has been mindful of the humble state of his servant” (v 48). In other words, *God has been mindful of me*, Mary says. *God could have found a rich, noble, powerful queen who lived in a palace. But he has chosen not to do so. He’s come instead to a lowly girl who has no apparent significance whatsoever. He’s come to me.*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “mindful” as: taking thought or taking care or keeping remembrance of something. *And, Mary says, this is why my soul glorifies—focuses on the greatness of—the Lord, and why my spirit rejoices in God my Savior—because he has taken thought of me. He has taken care of me. I am in his remembrance. I may be very little in the eyes of the world, but I am valuable in the eyes of the One who made the world.*

Mindful of Us

But Mary doesn’t sing simply in personal terms. At the end of her song, she also sings in “people” terms: “He has helped his servant, Israel [a whole nation], remembering [that’s the same word as for mindful] to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

Now the significance in this is huge. God is mindful of Mary as an individual because he is mindful of his people as a whole. Her significance lies in the fact that she is part of God’s plan for his people.

This is where a little history helps. Around 2,000 years before Mary sang, the God about whom she sang had made great promises to a man named Abraham. Back in the first book of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 12, he called Abraham out from his people and from his country and his household, telling him to go to a place that he would show him. And here is the promise of God to Abraham:

²I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12 v 2-3)

All the way through the Old Testament, God says again and again to Abraham's descendants (who came to be called "Israel" and known as Jews): *I am mindful of you, I am remembering you, and I will fulfill the promise that I have made.*

He sent prophets, his spokespeople, to reaffirm the promises. So, for instance, Isaiah said six centuries before Mary was born in Israel:

⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the

Christmas PLAYLIST

greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. (Isaiah 9 v 6-7)

And the bright people of the time would have sat around and said, *Well this must be all part and parcel of the fulfilling of God's promise to Abraham. A son will be given who will fulfill all God's promises, because God is still mindful of us.*

The Son Has Been Given

And then this young woman, Mary, says that God has indeed been mindful of her, and that by being mindful of her, he has been mindful of his people as a whole. The son has been given. The promises are about to be fulfilled.

This is what God is like. He is mindful. He is personally involved with humanity. He has promised to make blessing—fulfillment and security—available to “all peoples on earth.” The greatness of God is not revealed in his isolation from us; the greatness of God is revealed in his intimacy with us.

We tend to think of greatness in terms of isolation. So the more money you get, the longer you can make your driveway. Then you can get security fences, and guards. The more status you acquire, the more you

can remove yourself from the great ordinary mass of humanity. People will have to come and approach you through official channels, and so on.

As a Scotsman, I'm a subject of Queen Elizabeth II. But I haven't ever had a phone call or a visit from her. She doesn't know my name. Her greatness is revealed in how isolated she is from me. But God's greatness is revealed in his intimacy with us. He does know my name, and he does know yours. He knows about, and he cares about, the responsibilities that weigh heavy on you, the quiet disappointments that gnaw at you, and the concerns that keep you awake at night. He knows about your hopes and aspirations and the moments that make your heart sing. The Creator is mindful of you, and that gives you value, whatever the world sees when it looks at you, and however you are treated by those around you. He is mindful.

All of us, whatever our background or beliefs, have a picture of God. Many of us have a God who we do not believe in because we do not like him. If you do not believe in God because he is distant, uncaring, and unhelpful, I understand. I do not believe in that God either!

Here is the God of Christmas, of history. He is a God who knows you, and he cares about you, and he makes promises to you, and he acts to help you. He is the mindful God.

Mighty Over Us

Secondly, Mary sings, *God is mighty*: “The Mighty One has done great things for me ... he has performed mighty deeds with his arm” (v 49, 51). The picture of God here is of a warrior, extending his sword-arm in strength to achieve his purposes. And what does this mighty warrior do? He turns human attitudes upside down. Notice what has he done in his might. He has taken what society, culture, and individual men and women tend to lay greatest store by—and he has demolished it.

So first, he “has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts” (v 51). God does not often allow us to remain on our perch for long, if we think it is our abilities or hard work alone that put us or keeps us there. Some of the struggles that we have lived through in our lives which we tried to explain socially or economically or politically, or put down to “bad luck,” should actually be explained in terms of God’s mighty deeds.

Second, God has “brought down the rulers from their thrones” (v 52). Go through history and you can see that happening again and again. The proudest empires of the world eventually crumble to nothing.

And third, God sends the rich away empty even as he fills up the hungry with good things. Who are the people who shouldn’t be empty? Rich people. If you

are rich, you can buy what you want, eat where you like, go where you choose. Yet it is still possible to be rich and empty, not in your stomach but in your soul; because the more the rich have of the wealth that the rest of us so often prize, the emptier and more hollow things will be seen to be.

Maybe you are reading this and you know you're wealthy, but you also feel strangely empty. Maybe you are chasing more wealth, but each time you succeed, it just doesn't seem enough to fulfill you. The cliché that money cannot buy happiness is a cliché because it is true! And so is the saying, "You can't take it with you." Money cannot buy happiness and it cannot buy a way through death.

At first glance, scattering the self-reliant and sending the rich away empty seems at odds with the idea of a mindful God who cares about people. In fact, it is because God cares that he uses his might in this way. He doesn't do it vindictively. He does it purposefully. He sets people down—he removes good gifts from people—so that they might be delivered from their self-sufficient schemes and from their proud assumptions. When life is good, and successful, and comfortable, it is easy to think that we no longer need God—that we can in fact buy all we need. It is tragically easy to forget that our bodies cannot last forever, and that beyond our death we will meet with the One who is eternal. When life is good, it is easy to kid ourselves

that we are mightier than we truly are, and to forget the God who is truly mightier than we are.

That's why the mighty God "has scattered those who are proud" now—to help them deal with him now, in this life. And perhaps you can see how he's done that, or is doing that, in your own life. How will you react? God wants you to see that he is not a God who fits in with all your preferences and priorities—and that's great news! He is much bigger, more mighty, and more real than that. He scatters the proud so that they can become humble. And then he lifts them up. He helps those who are humble enough to say, *I don't actually have it all together. I don't have all my questions answered. I have struggles I need help with.* God fills "the hungry with good things"—once you've realized that you're hungry for something that this world cannot give you, you're ready to find the fullness God offers.

So, what do you think about when you think about God? Mary might well have answered that question, *God is mindful of us, and more mighty than us.* And the truth that God is both all-caring and all-powerful made her heart "rejoice"—and it's a truth that causes hearts to rejoice still today.