

The Faith of Elizabeth and Mary

Lesson for December 24, 2023

Unit I: Profiles in Faith

Adult Topic: Sharing Hope and Courage

Background Scripture: Luke 1:1-25, 36-45, 56-60

Printed Text: Luke 1:36-45,56

Key verse: *“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!”* (Luke 1:42-42, NIV)

An elderly widow, restricted in her activities, was eager to serve Christ. After praying about this, she realized that she could bring blessings to others by playing the piano. The next day she placed this small ad in the *Oakland Tribune*: "Pianist will play hymns by phone daily for those who are sick and despondent--the service is free." The notice included the number to dial. When people called, she would ask, "What hymn would you like to hear?" Within a few months her playing had brought cheer to several hundred people. Many of them freely poured out their hearts to her, and she was able to help and encourage them.

Author Unknown

We often need people with whom we can share our joys and sorrows. In this week’s lesson, Mary, the mother of Jesus, finds spiritual encouragement and a kindred spirit in her relationship with Elizabeth. Like the elderly widow in our example, Elizabeth brought joy and comfort to Mary.

Key Terms

1. **Angel** (verse 38) – A spiritual being believed to act as an attendant, agent, or messenger of God.
2. **Barren** (verse 36) – Desolate; empty; sterile; childless, or empty, or unfruitful.
3. **Conceived** (verse 36) – Seized; become pregnant or cause a baby to begin to be formed.
4. **Greeted** (verse 40) – To address with expression of kind wishes upon meeting or arrival.
5. **Leaped** (verse 41) – To spring or move suddenly.
6. **Went ... with haste** (verse 39) – Go with urgency; diligence, marked by swiftness.

Lesson Background

While Luke's name never appears in this gospel, ancient Christian tradition unanimously ascribes the book to him. One ancient prologue written to introduce the gospel describes Luke as a Syrian from Antioch. With this piece of information, we can deduce that Luke was probably not Jewish. Paul also listed him with other Gentiles in his greetings to the Colossians (4:14). The ancient prologue goes on to state that Luke eventually settled in the Greek city of Thebes, where he died at age 84. (Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development*)

Luke wrote his gospel knowing that many had already written histories of the life of Jesus. Having already read Matthew and Mark's account, Luke wanted to give a third account with an emphasis on comprehensiveness and order. Therefore, Luke is the most *comprehensive* gospel. He documents the story of Jesus' all the way from the annunciation of John the Baptist to Jesus' ascension.

Luke's own introduction to his gospel indicates that Luke composed the letter with the purpose of providing a careful rendering of the events of Christ's life in chronological order. As a physician, Luke would have been trained as a careful observer, a quality that would have been invaluable in this project.

Lesson in Depth

I. Divine Assurance (Luke 1:36-40)

This week's lesson is preceded by several important facts:

- The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist
- Zacharias' doubt of the angel's pronouncement resulting in his muteness
- Elizabeth's conception and joy
- The announcement of the birth of Jesus

Following the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary and his clarification of the divine act of the Holy Spirit resulting in her pregnancy, the angel made an additional pronouncement regarding Mary's cousin Elizabeth.

Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age: With such an amazing promise, Gabriel also brought evidence, explaining that Elizabeth was pregnant. If God could do that, He could do what He promised for Mary.

With God nothing shall be impossible: The point is clear. More literally, one could translate this *for no word of God shall be powerless*. God will absolutely perform what He has said.

This is telling Mary that all things are possible with God. Nothing is impossible to Him. Elizabeth is expecting John and Mary is expecting Jesus. John is the voice proclaiming the coming of Jesus Christ. His ministry will fade away as Jesus' ministry broadens.

Behold, the handmaid of the Lord! Mary first responded by agreeing with what Gabriel said about her. She *was* **the maidservant of the Lord**, and it was not her position to debate with her Master, but to accept what He said.

Let it be to me according to your word: Mary then responded with an affirmation of faith. “Let it be to me according to Your word” is the proper response of every believer to every promise of God. We see here, Mary totally submitted to God. She calls herself “handmaid of the Lord”. Because she is totally His servant. His will is her desire.

Mary was in an extremely embarrassing and difficult position. Betrothed to Joseph, she faced the stigma of an unwed motherhood. Joseph would obviously have known that the child was not his. She knew she would be accused of adultery, an offense punishable by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:13-21; John 8:3-5). Yet she willingly and graciously submitted to the will of God.

And the angel departed from her: We don’t know the exact moment Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary. It may have been when Gabriel spoke to her, or soon after. Whenever it was, the cloud of God’s glory *overshadowed* Mary (Luke 1:35), and Jesus was miraculously conceived in Mary’s womb.

Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste: Mary heard from Gabriel that her relative Elizabeth was pregnant (Luke 1:36). Immediately after the angel spoke to her, Mary set out to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah. The Bible does not tell us the birthplace of John the Baptist beyond the fact that he was born in a Judean town in hill country, which may have been near Jerusalem where Zechariah served as a priest. She went the considerable distance (somewhere between 80 and 100 miles) from the region of Galilee to the hill country of Judea for a visit.

Mary probably understood that not many people could understand her experience with Gabriel and miraculous conception. If anyone could understand, it might be Elizabeth.

And entered into the house of Zachariah, and saluted Elizabeth: Mary knows Elizabeth believes in God and will believe that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She also wants to hear about the miracle of Elisabeth’s pregnancy.

Elizabeth would have been more than six months pregnant by the time Mary reached her. It seems that Mary probably stayed with Elizabeth until after the birth of John the Baptist, and maybe a little longer to help her and the new baby boy. Her stay with Elizabeth for three months would have been both a spiritual and practical help to both of them, and Mary could learn from experience more about how to care for a newborn baby. She would also hear the prophecy of Zechariah about John and Jesus when God opened Zechariah’s mouth and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. She would have many encouraging experiences when she returned to her home.

II. Divine Encouragement (Luke 1:41-45, 56)

When Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: When Elizabeth saw Mary, her unborn child – John the Baptist – leaped, because he was filled with joy. Though John wasn't born yet, he had a spiritual awareness and could respond to the Spirit of God.

John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb: "*For he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit*" (Luke 1:15). John made his first prophecy before he was born when he leaped in his mother's womb when Elizabeth saw Mary, for the Holy Spirit within him confirmed by his leap that Mary was the mother of the Messiah. The Holy Spirit through Elizabeth revealed what his leap meant.

Though Mary believed the angel, she also received two witnesses that were filled with the Holy Spirit that confirmed what the angel Gabriel told her. One of these two witnesses was an unborn baby who was filled with the Holy Spirit and could testify to Elizabeth and Mary.

Filled with the Holy Ghost: Controlled by the Holy Spirit, who undoubtedly guided Elizabeth's remarkable expression of praise. This is the Spirit of the Holy Ghost that came upon Elisabeth the minute Mary greeted her. Her first statement was a message from God to Mary approving of the birth of the Christ child which is to be soon.

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! John the Baptist had not yet been born, and Zacharias was still mute. Yet Elizabeth *believed* the word of the Lord given to her husband Zacharias when he was in the temple. In the temple, Gabriel told him that their promised son would *make ready a people prepared for the Lord* (Luke 1:17).

Elizabeth believed that, and also believed that the baby in Mary's womb was the **Lord** who Elizabeth's son would prepare the way for (the mother of my Lord). This faith was in Elizabeth because she **was filled with the Holy Spirit**.

Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me: This expression is not in praise of Mary, but in praise of the Child whom she bore. It was a profound expression of Elizabeth's confidence that Mary's Child would be the long-hoped-for Messiah, the one whom even David called "Lord" (20:44). Even in Mary's womb, Jesus was the Messiah and Lord of Elizabeth, and through the Holy Spirit she acknowledged this fact. Jesus was the Lord over all before He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb. He was the Word made flesh; He came and dwelt among us: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:1 and 1:14). Jesus is the incarnate God and Elizabeth praised Jesus as her Lord even before He was born as the physical baby, Jesus.

Elizabeth's grasp of the situation was extraordinary, considering the aura of mystery that overshadowed all these events (2:19). She greeted Mary not with skepticism but with joy. She understood the response of the child in her own womb. And she seemed to comprehend the immense importance of the Child whom Mary was carrying.

The babe leaped in my womb for joy: The infant, like his mother, was Spirit-filled (verses 15, 41). His response, like that of Elizabeth, was supernaturally prompted by the Spirit of God.

We see that even before his birth John the Baptist recognized Jesus.

Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things: Elizabeth recognized that Mary's faith played an active role in receiving the promise. God promises should never make us passive; they should prompt us to seize them by faith. Elizabeth wanted to encourage Mary's faith, so she declared "there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."

Verses 46-56 record Mary's song of praise to the Lord known as the Magnificat, from the Latin for "magnify." Mary magnifies the Lord, proclaiming God's greatness and rejoicing in God as Savior.

And Mary abode with her about three months: Mary arrived in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (verse 26), so she evidently stayed until John the Baptist was born.

Returned to her own house: At this point Mary was still betrothed to Joseph, not yet living in his house (Matthew 1:24).

Lesson Summary

This week's lesson shares the story of two amazing women. One a young virgin girl, Mary, who said, in faith, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be done to me according to your word." Another is the older woman, Elizabeth, (the angel said she was in her OLD age), barren for so long, who is also carrying a miracle baby who says, "The Lord has done this for me. He has looked with favor in these days to take away my disgrace among the people."

- **God Provides.** God provided an older woman who was pregnant also, with a miracle baby, to be the safe place for Mary. Scripture says they spent three months together.
- **God puts people in our lives that require focused time.** Mary left Elizabeth's home a stronger and more confident woman in her faith and in her future. There are people in your life right now that need more time. God has placed them there for you to specifically pour into, to do life with, to encourage, to strengthen their faith, to invest in deeply. There may also be people that you need to "hurry" to see that will invest in you and pour into you.
- **Both Mary and Elizabeth trusted the path God placed them on.** Elizabeth and Zechariah remained righteous and committed to God despite their inability to have children. God blessed their faithfulness. Mary submitted to God's will and was willing to change her entire life to be the mother of God's Son.

- **We should be ready to give a blessing.** The first words out of Elizabeth's mouth when Mary walked in her home was words of blessing: *“You are the most blessed of women, and your child will be blessed.”*
- **We should give others a reason to sing.** Elizabeth's words of blessing to Mary caused Mary to break out in praise to God (Luke 2:46-55). When people are with you, do you make them want to sing? Do you so encourage their hearts that they are ready to praise God? Have you fanned the flame of their faith? Do they leave you, ready to boldly worship God and sing His praises? Ready to face the future because they trust God?