

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XI : MARY VISITS ELISABETH / THE MAGNIFICAT

Matthew	Mark	Luke 1:39-56	John	related passages
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Background / Overview

During his usual course of service, the priest Zacharias was chosen by lot to serve at the altar of incense, the highest honor for a normal priest which could occur but once a lifetime. While in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias saying he was to have a son which would be the forerunner of the Messiah, coming in the spirit and power of Elijah. Zacharias doubted this to be true since both he and his wife was very elderly, plus the fact his wife had been sterile all of her days. As both a sign and judgement for his disbelief, the angel struck Zacharias deaf and dumb. Zacharias then departed the temple, and when he had fulfilled his week of service, he and his wife returned to their home where his wife Elisabeth conceived.

Six months later the angel Gabriel appeared to a virgin named Mary in her home-town of Nazareth, saying she was to be used in a miraculous manner in the bringing forth of the Messiah. Since she was a virgin and betrothed to be married, she wondered what kind of birth this would be. The angel explained the birth was not to be as any other birth, but the Holy Spirit would “overshadow” her in such a manner to allow her to conceive within her womb the Son of God without the male seed. For a sign to support her faith, the angel brought forth the miracle the Lord had done for her cousin Elisabeth. Mary submitted to this service.

THIS WEEK’S LESSON: Mary immediately departed to see her cousin. Upon entering Zacharias and Elisabeth’s house, the Holy Spirit used the baby John as a sign to Elisabeth while still in the womb. The Holy Spirit then came upon Elisabeth allowing her to prophecy concerning the virgin Mary’s baby (“The Song of Elisabeth”). Mary then breaks out in a song of praise to the Lord for what He had done for His people (“The Magnificat”).

v39,40 And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth. : undoubtedly Mary’s decision to visit her cousin’s was prompted by Gabriel’s message concerning herself (vs 28-35) and regarding Elisabeth (vs 36,37). From the story given however, we can assume Mary had visited Elisabeth prior to this, or they had had previous contact at one or more of the great religious festivals.

The main city in the hilly Judea was Hebron, although it is not mentioned by Luke the exact city of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Some say instead of “Juda” the reading should be “Jutta,” a Levitical city south of Hebron (Josh 15:55; 21:16) but there is no textual support for this.

What kind of greeting did Mary and Elisabeth have? Some say this involved Mary reciting all the details of her experience which would then explain Elisabeth’s reaction in song. More probably however is that the greeting consisted of warm embraces accompanied by some genuine loving words. The response of Elisabeth is best explained by the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon her (vs 41).

v41 And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: : at six months of pregnancy, activity within the womb would not have been abnormal. Whatever movement this was then was either interpreted by Elisabeth as a sign from the Holy Spirit, or the movement of the baby was unusual, again a product of the Holy Spirit’s working.

v42 and she spake out with a loud voice, and said, : what follows is the first of five songs (poems) found in the infancy narratives of Luke (The Song of Elisabeth 1:42-45; The Song of Mary 1:46-55; The Prophecy of Zechariah 1:68-79; The Song of the Angels 2:14; and The Song of Simeon 2:29-32). “Indeed, it can truthfully be regarded as a Greek reproduction of a Semitic piece of poetry. The parallelistic structure of the lines, so characteristic of Hebrew and Aramaic poetry, the balanced form and contents of the neatly arranged clauses -- note, for example: ‘Blessed are ... And blessed is ... And blessed is ...’ mark them as being indeed a poem; or, if one prefers, Elisabeth’s Song. ‘Song’ here means metrical composition.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

She cried out in a loud voice because of her heart being filled with wonderment, thanksgiving and love. Not only did she not constrain herself but she did not wish to hold herself back.

Blessed art thou among women,

and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

And whence is this to me,

that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears,

*the babe leaped in my womb for joy.
And blessed is she that believed:
for there shall be a performance of those things
which were told her from the Lord.*

v42 Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. : “blessed” is the same as v28, and is where we get our word “eulogy.” We can assume from the last part of the phrase that Mary is already pregnant.

v43 And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? : note the “mother of my Lord” (cp Ps 110:1; Matt 22:43,44).

v44 For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. : does this mean the infant John was cognizant that the Messiah was nearby? The story states the following: (1) Mary greets Elizabeth. (2) Elizabeth hears the greeting. (3) The fetus within Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy. (4) Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, responds to the greeting with joy. (5) Elizabeth interprets the moving of the baby within her womb as a sign of its joy, this very joy being evidenced to her of “the Lord’s” presence. It is not necessary to force the issue that the infant John knew of Jesus’ presence. If he did, then that was the work of the Holy Spirit, especially in the light of 1:15. If he did not and Elisabeth interpreted the baby’s moving as moving for joy, that too was of the Holy Spirit.

v45 And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. : the word for “blessed” here is different than previously used; here is the word used in the beatitudes for happy.

When did Mary believe? Not when the fulfillment to God’s promise had come, but even prior to any evidence that the promise would come. What did Mary believe? Not only that the Messiah was finally to appear and that she was to take part in His coming, but that His coming was to be in a manner never before heard. How did she manifest her trust in God? By complete and voluntary surrender to His will.

Several commentators noted the fact that within all of this is total humility without any evidence of envy or jealousy. Elisabeth, an elderly woman faithful to the Lord all of her life and under reproach due to her bareness, had been blessed. Yet before her was a young maid, probably still in her teens, who was blessed even more than she! How easy it would have been to “compare blessings” and think “why does she bear the Messiah and not I?”

v46-55 What follows has often been given the title *The Magnificat*, derived from the first word in the Latin version: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, meaning “My soul magnifies the Lord.” While there are many similarities between Mary’s song and that of Hannah’s (1 Sam 2:1-10), it is unlikely Mary directly took Hannah’s song as a guide. Undoubtedly Mary was well acquainted with Hannah’s song as well as all the OT, and it would be natural for Mary to express her exaltation in biblical language. Her song:

*My soul doth magnify the Lord,
and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden:
for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For He that is mighty hath done to me great things;
and holy is His name.
And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation.
He hath shewed strength with His arm;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich He hath sent empty away.
He hath holpen His servant Israel,
in remembrance of His mercy;
as He spake to our fathers,
to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.*

<i>The Magnificat</i>			
first stanza, v46-48	Mary extolls God for what he had done for her, a maiden of lowly birth.	<i>My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.</i>	1 Sam 2:1; Ps 103:1
		<i>For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.</i>	1 Sam 1:11; Ps 25:18
second stanza, v49,50	Mary's thanksgiving and praise, having reached a climax with "holy is His name." She begins, as it were, to take in more territory. Her spiritual horizon widens. From concentration on the manner in which God's mercy has affected herself she ascends to the contemplation of that divine lovingkindness as revealed "from generation to generation to those that fear Him."	<i>For He that is mighty hath done to me great things;</i>	
		<i>and holy is His name.</i>	1 Sam 2:2; Ps 22:3; 71:22; 89:18; 99:3; 103:1
		<i>And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation.</i>	Ps 103:17
third stanza, v51-53	This mercy is all the more strikingly apparent when contrasted with God's severity toward those who do not fear Him.	<i>He hath shewed strength with His arm;</i>	Ps 44:3; 98:1; Isa 53:1
		<i>He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.</i>	1 Sam 2:4,9,10; Ps 89:10; Job 12:19
		<i>He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.</i>	1 Sam 2:8; 2 Sam 22:18,28; Job 5:11; 12:19
		<i>He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away.</i>	1 Sam 2:5,7; Ps 103:5; 107:9
fourth stanza, v54,55	The conclusion expresses a thought often neglected today even in conservative circles, namely, that the manifestation of God's mercy is the fulfillment of the covenant promise God made to the fathers, a promise of supreme value even today to believers and their seed.	<i>He hath holpen His servant Israel,</i>	Ps 98:3; 147:2,19
		<i>in remembrance of His mercy;</i>	Ps 25:6; 98:3; 136; Isa 41:8,9
		<i>as He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.</i>	Gen 22:2,3; 17:7; 22:15-18; Ex 2:24; 2 Sam 22:51; Ps 105:6-10; Mic 7:20

{ adapted mainly from Hendriksen, Luke }

v46,47 And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. : in these parallel lines, soul and spirit is equivalent. I am a trichotomist (man is body, soul and spirit) but I also believe the scriptures speak in both senses. At times the bible makes a difference between man's soul and spirit. At other times that is not the issue, and the point the bible writer is trying to make is a distinction between man's physical part (his body) and his spiritual part (his soul and / or spirit). Here Mary is using them synonymously.

"magnify" means to make great, to enlarge, to glorify, to praise and extol

It is interesting to notice the similarity between Mary's statement here and the first question of the Shorter Catechism, adopted more than seventeen centuries after Mary's song: "My soul *magnifies* ... my spirit *rejoices*." The answer to the first question is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Christianity is not external "do's and don'ts" but an enjoyable relationship with the Creator of the universe and the Saviour of mankind.

In what sense is God her Saviour? The words *Savior, save, salvation* basically refer to a deliverance, and none would deny that it cannot always taken in the spiritual sense. A person may be saved from sickness, death, an enemy, etc (e.g. 1 Sam 11:13).

Sometimes there seems to be a blending of the physical and spiritual salvation (e.g. Isa 63:8,9). Sometimes the meaning is either predominantly or exclusively spiritual deliverance from sin (e.g. Ps 51:12-14). While Mary only had the OT at her disposal, the deliverance from sin is clearly taught throughout (Isa 1:18; 12:2,3; 53). That Mary was thinking of her being saved from oblivion which otherwise would have been her lot is to be included (note v48). But that cannot be the only thing, for Mary knew as well that the Messiah was to be named Jesus, *for He will save His people from their sins* (Mt 1:21).

v48 For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. : we are to think of Mary as blessed (the word here means happy, not eulogy or praised) because of the Lord using her to bring the Saviour into the world (vs 49). We are not to think of her as a mediator (1 Tim 2:5) or honor her as above sin (*hyperdulia*, the veneration of the Virgin Mary as holiest of creatures). Note that we are to *call* her blessed, not “*will invoke my blessing.*”

v49 For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His name. : Mary here extols His power, displayed in a unique manner of what’s called *parthenogenesis*, the conception without the penetration of a passive female cell by an active male cell.

Christianity is personal, “what He has done *for me.*” David said the same of the good Shepherd in Ps 23:1.

v50 And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation. : Mary not only speaks of God’s power by His mercy, His steadfast love, His lovingkindness.

Note the restriction she places upon God’s mercy: *to those that fear Him*. This is not to deny “common grace” or the goodness of God to all man in general (Gen 17:20; 39:5; Ps 36:6; 145:9,15,16; Matt 5:42; Mk 8:2; Lk 6:35,36; Acts 14:16,17; Rom 2:4; 1 Tim 4:10). But this and many other passages clearly teach that God does favor His own in a sense which cannot be denied as well (Dt 7:9; Ps 25:10; 103:18; Isa 55:3,6; 57:15; Matt 5:1-12; Jn 10:11,15,26-28; 11:25,26).

v51 He hath shewed strength with His arm; : Mary now moves from what the Lord had done for her to what He has done for all generally. “*His arm*” is not to be taken literally but as an anthropomorphism (ascribing to God that which pertains to a man). “*His arm*” is a reference to *His power*, and can be used to deliver, to support, to uphold as well as to scatter, to bring down, and to drive out. This stanza of Mary’s song speaks of both aspects of God’s “arm.”

v51-53 He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away. : Mary now draws a contrast to bring out how deeply God’s children is indebted to Him. She does this by placing side-by-side the blessings they receive over against the punishments suffered by the wicked. On one side is the arrogant, the mighty, the rich (the rulers); on the other side is the humble and the hungry (His children, the lowly and poor).

v54,55 He hath holpen His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy; as He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever. : Mary has been praising God for His deeds, now she points out what those deeds mean in relation to Israel and the promises made to her forefathers. The word for servant is *paidos*, which is often translated “child.” The word can refer to a child, a boy, a youth, or a servant. The same word is used in Lk 2:43 of the *child* Jesus being left in Jerusalem.

v56 And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house. : while some believe this to mean after Elisabeth had John, the most natural reading of the passage indicates Mary departed just as John was to be born. This would be natural since she would be three months pregnant at the time, and the household of Elisabeth was about to be very busy with helpers, visitors, friends, etc.