

A Surprising Visit

Luke 1:39-45

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³⁹In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴²and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” – Luke 1:39-45, ESV

Angel-Inspired Visit

Have you ever had the feeling that you just had to go somewhere? When I first read about Bar Harbor and Acadia National Park in Maine, I really felt a strong urge to go. We had scheduled to take a few days off work for our anniversary. We didn't have kids yet, so we got in the car at 7 p.m. and drove the 15 hours to get there by 10 a.m. the next morning. It was one of the best decisions I'd ever made and one of the best trips we've ever taken. Likewise, from the time Jacob and Carol Lee moved to Uganda to be in the field full-time with Reaching Africa's Unreached, I've wanted to visit them and serve the Lord alongside them.

Mary has just been given the most unexpected and unbelievable news any woman has ever been give. She has responded with honest confusion and then with humble submission. Now, she immediately reacts to Gabriel's news about Elizabeth's pregnancy by travelling 80-100 miles over the course of 4 days into the Judean hill country to visit Elizabeth.

Why does Mary go to visit Elizabeth? Well, she knows that her pregnancy and Elizabeth's pregnancy are connected in their significance. Maybe she really wants to find out more about what Elizabeth has been told by the Lord about her pregnancy. Maybe she needs space and time to process the news she's just received. Maybe she knows that Elizabeth, being an older woman, could likely use some help during the later weeks of her pregnancy as she prepares for delivery. Maybe she wants the advice of her older godly cousin on handling a miraculous pregnancy. Maybe it's a combination of all of these reasons.

Gabriel doesn't tell Mary to go and visit Elizabeth. But clearly Mary is inspired by Gabriel's words to seek out her cousin and spend time with her. So she goes “with haste,” hurrying to leave and travel the lengthy distance, which would probably take her through Samaritan territory, to see Elizabeth. She probably won't even settle things with Joseph until after she returns 3 months later.

A. A Warm Greeting (vv. 39-40)

Elizabeth and Mary apparently know each other, though we don't know exactly how. Tradition says that Mary's family is from the Jerusalem area, but we don't know for sure. They likely met during some of the pilgrimage feasts in Jerusalem over the years. However they met and however well they knew each other, the first thing we're told is that Mary “*entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.*”

This is one of those places in the Bible where so many Bible teachers and scholars have been tempted to speculate: What was said in this greeting? How long did Mary and Elizabeth talk? Did Mary explain her pregnancy to Elizabeth? The fact is that Luke doesn't go into those details. In fact, the passage just tells us that Mary greeted Elizabeth. Nothing more.

Speculation in Bible study is often distracting and can be dangerous. It happens so much with the Christmas story. Part of that is because the birth of Jesus is one of the most beloved stories of all time and the Gospel narratives in Matthew and Luke don't give us very many details. We're left with so many unanswered questions, it can be very tempting to speculate, like so many people did after seeing *The Force Awakens*.

It is vital that we learn the spiritual discipline of sticking with the text. In this case, Luke is intentionally highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in this encounter. Our attempts to speculate about the greeting draw attention away from the Holy Spirit.

B. An Unusual Movement (vv. 41)

So, we read, *“And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”*

We're being shown the power of the Holy Spirit as He fills His people, first the unborn John the Baptist and then Elizabeth. Earlier in Luke 1, John's father, Zechariah, was told by the angel Gabriel that John “will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.” Here we see the fulfillment of this prediction of Gabriel.

We can draw several legitimate inferences from this wonderful leap of John the Baptist:

1. The first inference is that children in the womb are people. They are human beings and are consistently treated as human beings, as real persons, through the Bible. From Jacob and Esau's wrestling in Rebekah's womb to David's celebration of how the Lord knit him together in his mother's womb in Psalm 139 to God telling Jeremiah the prophet, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,” God has always been clear that babies in their mother's wombs are real people.
2. The second inference is that salvation is entirely the sovereign work of almighty God. What had John the Baptist done to merit God's favor or to ask the Holy Spirit to fill him? He was regenerate and Spirit-filled from the womb by the sovereign grace of God alone.
3. And the third is in keeping with this, which is that regeneration by the Holy Spirit comes before faith and is, in fact, the cause of faith. We believe because the Holy Spirit makes us alive, not vice-versa.

All of these truths and more can be inferred from the fact that John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb for joy at the approach of Mary and, even more importantly, at the approach of the newly created unborn Baby Jesus, who would be just days old at this point, probably. Already John was fulfilling God's call on his life to be the forerunner of the Messiah and to announce his coming to the world. The first person John told about Jesus was his mother, Elizabeth, and he did it the only way he could, by leaping in her womb.

Does this seem fantastic to you? After all, how could an unborn John the Baptist know that the Messiah was approaching in the womb of His mother? Well, he couldn't, of course, but the leaping John did wasn't done because of what John knew. It was the work of the Holy Spirit.

C. A Spirit-Filled Blessing (vv. 41-44)

Similarly, how could Elizabeth have known, after only a simple greeting, that Mary was even pregnant, much less that she was carrying the Messiah in her womb? This question has been the source of all the speculation regarding what was said during the greeting, but the speculation is unnecessary if you take Luke's words seriously as the word of God when he tells us that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when she spoke. She was, in essence, a prophetess in that moment, the mouthpiece of God. She didn't know in and of herself, God showed her, and she rejoiced.

1. Blessed are you among women . . .

You may have noticed that I pronounced this as "bless-ed," using two syllables, and not as "blessed," while later in verse 45, it's "*And blessed is she who believed.*" The difference in my pronunciation is intentional. The Greek uses two different words which are translated as "blessed" or "blessed." One is eulogos, the word we get "eulogy" from and it means to be spoken well of or to be praised, like we do in eulogies when someone dies. This word corresponds more closely to what we mean by "bless-ed"-special, holy, praiseworthy, sacred. The other Greek word is Makarios, and it means "fortunate" or "well off" or what we mean by "blessed."

So, here Elizabeth is saying that Mary is someone who is going to be spoken well of, who will have the highest reputation among women, who will be praised for her role in bringing the Messiah into the world. Later, she will say that she is blessed by God because she believed. Now, many protestants get very uncomfortable when we talk about "the Bless-ed Virgin Mary." We think this can lead to the worship of Mary. Notice, though, that Mary is bless-ed among women, not bless-ed above women. She is still a real, flesh-and-blood woman. But it's undeniable that she had the greatest role to play among all women. She was indeed highly favored, as Gabriel said when he greeted her, and she has been praised and held in high regard for centuries.

2. Blessed is the fruit of your womb . . .

But the real reason why Mary is bless-ed is because of the fruit of her womb. She is carrying The Bless-ed One! Thus, Elizabeth asks in all humility, "*And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*" Elizabeth isn't overwhelmed because her cousin has come to her, but because the mother of the Messiah has come to her.

Elizabeth is remarkably humble and completely devoid of envy in her celebratory words here. She sees by the power of the Holy Spirit what God is doing, and she does not covet Mary's role or express any dissatisfaction with her son's lesser status. She is overjoyed at the privilege she has been given and is joyfully thankful.

3. For behold . . .

Then Elizabeth gives credit to her unborn prophet son, John, for being the one who signaled the joyful news to her: "*For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.*" Of course, the Holy Spirit gave her the insight to understand this remarkable movement of her baby boy.

Mothers in late pregnancy get used to feeling their babies move all the time. It's when they don't move that we get nervous. But John's "leap" must have been remarkable indeed, a most dramatic movement that got his mom's attention for sure.

We need to look at John and Elizabeth here in this passage and see the way they fulfilled their callings with such joy and humility and passion. Like John, we are called to point people to Jesus and not to ourselves. John consistently did so with joy and passion. Do we? Like Elizabeth, sometimes we are called to take a lower place or a lesser role in the work God is doing. Elizabeth did so with such joyful humility, truly thankful that God was using her at all.

Perhaps we have lost sight of how wonderful Jesus is and what an honor it is to know Him and to be able to tell others about Him. Perhaps we've lost sight of what a blessing and honor it is to have any role at all in the kingdom of God. But the Sons of Korah knew this joyful honor well, as they wrote in psalm 84:

*For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.*

D. The Real Source of Blessing (v. 45)

And then Elizabeth speaks of the real blessing and the real source of the blessing in Mary's life, in verse 45: "*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.*" Elizabeth is really speaking the first beatitude of the Gospels here, and for that reason I prefer the translations that read "*Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.*"

Blessed is she who believed. Mary is a model of many things in her response to the words of Gabriel – humility, submission. But at the heart of it all is her faith: She believed. Elizabeth may be thinking of the contrast with her own husband, who was a very godly man, but who nonetheless did not believe the words of Gabriel and was struck mute as a result. Even as Elizabeth speaks to Mary, Zechariah is unable to greet Mary, unable to speak, because of his lack of faith.

Mary is blessed because she believed. If Jesus has done all that is needed for our salvation, if God is the One who does great things for us, then we are blessed if we believe. Pure and simple faith, to hear and to believe what the Lord promises, is all that is required for the blessing of God. Even this faith is a gift from God, so we are doubly blessed, blessed to receive it and blessed when we exercise it.

How is Mary blessed? She is blessed because there will indeed be a fulfillment of the things spoken to her by the Lord. What Gabriel said was already happening inside Mary's womb and the glorious future he had told Mary, that her Son would sit on David's throne forever, was going to be fulfilled.

God always keeps His promises. Our faith in His word is never misplaced. But let's get honest for a moment, shall we? Things didn't quite work out for any of these people the way they thought they would, did they? The leaping unborn John the Baptist would be unjustly arrested, imprisoned and beheaded by Herod Antipas. Mary would never see her Son sit on David's throne, but she would watch Him hang on a Roman cross as a common criminal.

God's promises never fail, but God rarely keeps His promises in the way we would expect or desire. He promises us a kingdom, but then he tells us that we must enter that kingdom through many tribulations. He promises us His peace, but then He also tells us that "in this world, you will have trouble." He tells us that we are loved, forgiven and adopted, but also that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

"Blessed is she who believed" Even though her expectations were shattered and her heart was broken, Mary's faith was vindicated and she was blessed indeed. Everything Gabriel told her about her Son was fulfilled, is being fulfilled and will be fulfilled forever. Faith trusts that God will always keep His promises, even when He fails to meet our expectations – perhaps even especially when he fails to meet our expectations.

Elizabeth: A Model of Love and Praise

I'd like to come back to Elizabeth as we close. William Hendricksen, in his commentary on Luke, identifies Elizabeth's words here as one of the songs of the Christmas story in Luke 1-2. Last year, I preached through "The Original Christmas Songs" and I didn't include this one because I'm not convinced it was a song like the others. But I really respect Hendricksen, and he calls this Elizabeth's Song of Love.

Why a Song of Love? Because love does not boast or envy. Love rejoices in the truth. Elizabeth models this kind of love here in her words to Mary:

1. She is not boasting, saying, "You know, Mary, I had my miraculous pregnancy six months before you had yours."
2. She is not envying, saying, "Well, you just had to upstage me, didn't you? I got pregnancy after years of being unable to have children, and now you get pregnant in an even more miraculous manner! Did you have to come down here and spend time around me, just to be a living reminder that your miracle is better than mine?"

In fact, what is so remarkable about Elizabeth's words is that she speaks so little of herself at all. Her focus is clearly on Mary and on her baby boy. When Elizabeth refers to herself, it is to comment on how

amazing it is that the mother of her Lord should come to visit her. When Elizabeth refers to her baby boy, it is to point out that even he is celebrating the greater Promised One Mary is carrying.

This is love, a self-forgetting, others-focused celebration of joy. This is love, not feigned or forced, but flowing naturally from a heart of humility and gratitude. If we would learn to love one another the way Elizabeth loves Mary here, we need the Holy Spirit to fill us, too. The first fruit of the Spirit is love, the kind of love Elizabeth displays here.

But Elizabeth is not just a model of love; she is also a model of praise, as Mary herself will be when she opens her lips and sings The Magnificat in verse 46. Elizabeth's heart is not just filled with love for Mary but with praise to God. She believes and rejoices in the fact that God will indeed fulfill all the words He spoke to Zechariah and to Mary. And her praise is joyful and expectant. Is ours?