

Luke 1:39-55
Mary and Elizabeth

Mary has just heard from the angel Gabriel that she is to be the mother of the Messiah. Her humble, submissive response was extraordinary given the unique circumstances. Though she did not ask for a sign, God graciously gave her one as the angel told her that her relative Elizabeth was also with child. Mary took advantage of the opportunity to visit her and their conversation, and Mary's praise to God, are recounted by Luke in this passage.

Personal Affirmation

We are told Elizabeth was in her sixth month when Mary was visited by the angel (v.26). Some have suggested that she went to visit Elizabeth to hide her pregnancy, but this makes little sense since she was gone only three months. Her pregnancy would hardly have been noticeable during that time; it was when she returned that she would have begun to show signs of being with child.

The hill country of Judah was south about 60 miles or so to the south. It would have taken three or four days to travel the distance. No mention is made of Joseph going on the journey, so this was a highly unusual trip for a young girl to make on her own.

When they met, Mary and Elizabeth no doubt shared their stories. They must have marveled at the details. Both women had been visited by an angel. Neither had a reason to expect to be pregnant. Both had been promised a son and told what to name him. Both had been told their child would be great.

This visit had to provide great personal affirmation for Mary. She could talk with the one person who would believe her story. After all, even Joseph had doubted (Matthew 1:19).

We should not underestimate the value of fellowship with other believers. To talk over our joys and fears with like-minded believers is a great grace. Do not ignore this.

Physical Affirmation

"The baby leaped" at the voice of Mary. John the Baptist, not yet born, even from the womb began his ministry by announcing the coming of the Messiah. What a remarkable testimony to the sovereignty and power of God in salvation. Neither Elizabeth nor Mary knew the other's story at this point. Elizabeth had simply heard the sound of Mary greeting her; they had not yet talked when John the Baptist expressed joy at the coming of the Lord.

Prophetic Affirmation

"Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." This expression is often used in the context of speaking a message from God. Zacharias (Luke 1:67), Simeon (Luke 2:27-32), various believers (Acts 4:31), writers of Scripture (1 Peter 1:21).

"Blessed are you among women," is a phrase common phrase to denote God's special favor. In Hebrew culture, a woman's status was often related to the significance of her children. That Mary was the mother of the Messiah was, obviously, the highest status a Jewish woman could achieve.

The humility of Elizabeth must be remarked upon as well. While she could have responded with jealousy toward Mary “stealing her thunder” instead she not only rejoiced with her but acknowledged her blessing to be the greater.

“Blessed is the fruit of your womb” is a sign of eternal perspective. Jesus would hardly be considered “blessed” in this life. Misunderstood by his closest friends, despised by the leaders of the people He came to save, betrayed and crucified as a criminal, He was hardly blessed by worldly standards. Yet He reigns at the right hand of God.

Again perspective on Mary is required. Nowhere in all of this praise is the idea that Mary is the “Mother of God” who is worthy to be venerated or worshipped. Indeed the praise given her by Elizabeth is that she “believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord.”

Elizabeth would have appreciated that Mary had believed. After all, she and her husband had not spoken for six months because he did not!

The Magnificat - an example of proper worship

Mary, like virtually all others in her day, had no personal copy of the Scriptures. Her learned understanding must have come from attentive listening as it was read in the synagogue.

“My soul exalts in the Lord” - Psalm 34:2

“For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant” - 1 Samuel 1:11

“From this time all generations will count be blessed” - Genesis 30:13

“For the Mighty One has done great things for me” - Psalm 126:3

“His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him” - Psalm 103:17

God has made us to worship Him. Therefore all of us are worshippers. The question is concerning what we worship. False worship is “natural” to us because of our sin nature. It takes little prompting. Equally wrong is worshipping God in the wrong way. This was the sin of the Israelites at Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:7-8). It was also true of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1) who offered “strange fire,” Saul who did not wait for Samuel but usurped the role of priest (1 Samuel 13:12), and others. The remarkable detail of the description of the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant is an indication of the seriousness with which God takes worship of Himself.

First, true worship begins with praise, and praise begins with an attitude of thanksgiving. We all have more mercy than we deserve. This attitude allows our worship to be genuine and sincere rather than routine and formal.

Mary cries out, “My soul exalts the Lord.” This passage does not read as if it comes from a routine expression of prescribed prayer. True worshippers worship in “spirit and truth,” (John 4:24). God has no regard for insincere worship. Isaiah 29:13-14,

“¹³Then the Lord said,

‘Because this people draw near with their words

And honor Me with their lip service,
But they remove their hearts far from Me,
And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote,
¹⁴Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous;
And the wisdom of their wise men will perish,
And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed.”

This was echoed by both Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Amos emphasized God’s disgust in 5:21-22,

²¹“I hate, I reject your festivals,
Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.
²²Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

Mary’s exaltation of praise is genuine. She recounts God’s great blessings and promises with passion and appreciation.

Second, true worship seeks to honor God, not manipulate Him. This requires a right understanding of who God is and who we are. Mary possessed that understanding; she was truly humble. “For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant” is not mere rote. Her response to the angel’s message indicates that this reflected her heart. Notice how many of the elements in her song of praise involve humility and/or pride.

This was not merely an understanding of her humble state in the context of Jewish society (young girl from an insignificant village engaged to a common tradesman). Her exaltation is in “God my Savior.” She understood her need of a Savior. It is ironic that perhaps no one would object more to the high place Mary holds in the Catholic tradition than Mary, herself. We cannot all be rich, or famous, or gifted, but we can all be humble.

Finally, true worship understands Whom it worships. It is not blind and ignorant. To worship God rightly we must know Who He is and what He expects from us.

Mary understands that God has done “mighty deeds,” “scattered those who were proud,” “brought down rulers from their thrones,” “exalted those who were humble,” “filled the hungry,” “sent away the rich,” and “given help to Israel.” What lessons from Israel’s history was she considering as she spoke these praises. Surely she understood the covenant God had made “to Abraham and his descendants forever” in which she was to play so significant a role

Take Aways

Appreciate and cultivate good times of fellowship with other believers.

Cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving and humility to prepare our hearts for proper worship of God.

Let our praise of God be seasoned with Scripture that we may accurately worship Him.