

Prayer

Lift our hearts, Lord Jesus Christ, and encourage us by Your spiritual gifts, to live victoriously in the power of Your love. Give us the audacity to face the enemy wherever he may confront us, and the nerve to trust you completely for deliverance and salvation. You are our inspiration and our hope, Lord Jesus, for You have won the victory over the enemy, forever; Hallelujah!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

When you eat today, give thanks for God's provision of food and bless what you eat in Jesus' name

On-going prayers

- **Pray for major industrial nations** *Pray today for Russia, a country with immense capacity and influence. Pray that it will be led openly and well.*
- *Give thanks to God for the pleasure of preparing for Christmas*
- *Pray today for the Copenhagen environmental summit*

Meditation

(developed from 1 Chronicles 4:10)

I ask for Your blessing,
Creator God of universal majesty.
Draw near to me, examine me and remake my soul;
Give me the assurance of my salvation.

I ask for Your provision,
Almighty Lord of ultimate authority.
Help me, and from the treasures of Your storehouse;
Grant me the means to do Your will.

I ask for Your presence,
Loving Christ of Calvary and Easter.
Touch me and purify me with Your precious salvation;
And lead me forever into your peace.

I ask for Your protection
All powerful Spirit of wind and fire.
Gather me in Your protective arms and restore my zeal;
To do, to be, and to live, renewed.

Bible passage – Luke 1:39-45

³⁹ At this time, Mary set out and travelled with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ and arrived at the house of Zachariah where she greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped within her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and cried out with a loud voice, 'You are the most blessed of women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped with joy! ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who believes that what has been told her by the Lord will come true!'

Thought for the Day

Text

Luke 1:40

'When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped within her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.'

Thought

This is the first reference in Scripture to being 'filled with the Holy Spirit', and it is said of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist! At a time when all society was governed by men, it is astonishing to read that God's great plan of salvation was for a few brief months the personal secret of two women, blessed by God with faith and obedience, and the wondrous task of motherhood.

The Holy Spirit will always break through our human perceptions and do astonishing things. At this Advent and Christmas time, look to find what God is doing where you least expect it. He is there.

Bible Study

Review

Here is a simple story of joy and delight, telling us what Mary did as soon as she heard the news brought to her by Gabriel. At the end of his message, the angel had told Mary that her relative, Elizabeth was pregnant (1:36), and she went to see her as quickly as possible. She went not just to verify what the angel's news, but to share the great joy that Elizabeth, a woman who had endured years of misery as a barren woman, was now expecting. This was more than 'a dream come true'; both women recognised that what was happening was the result of the Lord's work within them. They were privileged to be the ones chosen by God to do His will, and their meeting was a glorious reunion, blessed by the presence of the Holy Spirit (1:41) in a remarkable way.

The more we read Luke's Gospel, the more we come across the Holy Spirit (1:15, 35, 41), and we know that the second volume of his work, the Acts of the Apostles, concentrates on the work of the Holy Spirit amongst the early believers. By comparison, the Old Testament describes the Holy Spirit only sparingly, inspiring prophets, bringing purity and cleansing, or being an agent of God's work to save His people (see Psalm 51:11, or Isaiah 63:10,11). But now, here at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, the presence of the Holy Spirit within the stories of Jesus' birth is immediately striking. Here in this story, the Holy Spirit breaks into the lives of Elizabeth and Mary with unconfined joy and a sense of great celebration.

Mary had travelled with excitement (see 'going deeper') to visit her relative, and Luke tells us that Elizabeth is immediately inspired by her greeting. She is then 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (1:41) as the child in her womb stirs within her. This is a precious moment of joy and reassurance for Elizabeth, for whom the whole event was on-going proof of the Lord's blessing. Her barren years may well have included miscarriages or stillbirths, and this powerful sign of life within her own body was the joyous evidence of God's promise through her husband Zachariah. So moved, she cried out a powerful prophetic greeting to Mary (1:42-45).

Elizabeth's prophetic words are important. Firstly, it is remarkable that in a culture dominated by men, the first prophetic words within the New Testament are spoken by Elizabeth, who is a woman. She is not commonly regarded as a 'prophet', because her pronouncement to Mary happened on one special occasion, but there is no doubt that her words were prophetic. First, she offered Mary a blessing for what God had done within her, and as a woman, she would have understood the spiritual and physical consequences of this. She was also the first to bless Jesus as the 'fruit' of Mary's womb. Now at that time, Mary had only just heard that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit (1:35), but Elizabeth recognised the significance of both Mary and the child she bore. She knew that He special and referred to him as 'my Lord'; and in using these words, Elizabeth was the first to confess Jesus as God's Messiah. Not only did she recognise this herself, but so did the baby within her womb, who was John the Baptist (1:44)!

Elizabeth's last words were very important; *'Blessed is she who believes that what has been told her by the Lord will come true.'* Elizabeth had held the news of her own pregnancy private for more than six months (1:38), and Mary's visit was the first time her pregnancy was recognised by someone outside her family. During the early months of her pregnancy, Elizabeth had retained her belief in what the Lord was doing within her, and now she had the proof through the stirring of the baby within her. She therefore encouraged Mary to have faith that what she had been told by the angel of the Lord would indeed come true, just as what had been told her husband had come true for her.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- More about Mary and Elizabeth, and where they lived

- More about the presence of the Holy Spirit within Elizabeth
- Faith and blessing

Notes on the text and translation

Significant phrases

V41 'leaped in her womb'

Other translations:

'leaped in her womb' (NIV & NRSV)

The traditional rendering of the Greek word 'skirtao' is to 'leap', but the Greek word is a straightforward description of what every pregnant woman feels, which is the movement of the child in the womb, often described as 'stirring' or 'kicking'. However, in verse 44 the same words appears attached to the word 'joy', and translated 'leaped for joy'. This translation is preferred because it is common to speak of jumping for joy, if not for a child in the womb!

V42 'You are the most blessed of women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb'

Other translations:

'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!' (NIV)

'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' (NRSV)

The arrangement of the words in the Greek suggests that Elizabeth was declaring Mary more blessed than other women (see the commentary on Luke's Gospel by Howard Marshall). I suggest that this makes more sense here than the traditional translation.

V45 'will come true'

Other translations:

'will be accomplished' (NIV)

'would be a fulfilment' (NRSV)

The Greek word used here is 'teleiosis', which refers to the completion of something, hence the traditional translations which speak of 'fulfilment'. However, a normal English expression here is 'come true', and in this instance this is quite simply what is meant. Mary is encouraged to believe that what Gabriel has told her will indeed happen.

Going Deeper

More about Mary and Elizabeth, and where they lived

At the beginning of this passage, we meet Mary, fresh from hearing the news of her forthcoming pregnancy, travelling south, from Galilee to the 'hill country of Judea' (1:39). The hill country of Judea is generally reckoned to be the region of hills to the south west of Jerusalem, containing Bethlehem and other towns, possibly a eighty or so miles south of Galilee, the region from which Mary came and a journey of three or four days length. Of course, Mary makes the journey south nine months later, heavily pregnant, for the sake of the census taken at Bethlehem, her husband-to-be's ancestral home (2:1f.). On this occasion, she is still an agile young woman, and the passage says that she travelled with 'haste', and with no mention of a companion or of Joseph. The Greek word used here for 'haste' means 'earnestness, zeal, diligence', so 'haste' is probably the right translation; but knowing the meaning of the word, we gain a sense of her eagerness to verify what Gabriel said to her and meet her relative Elizabeth.

There has been much speculation about the exact relationship between Mary and Elizabeth, and the common assumption is that they were cousins. This, however, is purely speculation, for the New Testament gives us no further information other than the unspecific word 'relative'. In the large extended families of those days, this could mean almost anything from cousin to a close or distant aunt. We must remember that Zachariah described his wife as 'getting on in years' (1:18), so would have affected the relationship between the two, at least in terms of cultural niceties.

More about the presence of the Holy Spirit within Elizabeth

Whatever the exact physical relationship of Elizabeth and Mary, however, it is remarkable that Elizabeth, the older and more senior figure, defers spiritually to the younger Mary. She recognises the blessing of God on Mary and the story makes sense only if we assume that she (and therefore we) know both that she is to be

the mother of the 'forerunner' (John the Baptist) and Mary is to be the mother of the Messiah. Some of this she knew from what she had been told by her husband Zachariah, and we must assume that he managed to find a way of communicating with her despite his punishment of being deaf and dumb (see previous studies). Yet Elizabeth would have needed spiritual revelation in order to draw all the conclusions necessary to say what she says here. Clearly, the response of her baby to the presence of Mary and the embryonic Jesus within his mother was highly significant for her. A mother knows the movements of a child in her womb, and the kick, leap or turn of the child at the presence of Mary affected her profoundly (1:41,44).

It is presumptive of us to imagine what the babies within Elizabeth and Mary were conscious of, but today, it is becoming ever more accepted that the child in the womb is connected in almost every conceivable way to its mother, including not just physical sensations but emotional reactions. The growing baby responds increasingly to stimuli within the womb, and the story in Luke presents us with a beautiful recognition of the meaningful nature of life within the womb. This is not an insignificant point.

We may also be surprised that Elizabeth is described as crying out with a loud voice (1:42); was this not unseemly? On the contrary, these words indicate to the reader the prophetic nature of Elizabeth's words. Frequently in Scripture, a prophet 'cries out', indeed, the task of the child, John the Baptist, was to 'cry out' in the wilderness 'prepare the way of the Lord' (3:4). We may reckon that Elizabeth's prophetic gift was the beginnings of the same gift in her son! She also had the courage to proclaim aloud a message of blessing. This was not a normal manner of greeting, and a priest normally conveyed the blessing of God. Whether Elizabeth was conscious of this or not, her actions and words are clearly a reflection of the work of the Holy Spirit in her.

Faith and blessing

This brief passage is characterised by two important spiritual characteristics, faith and blessing. To bless means to be gracious and favourable towards someone. Therefore, for God to bless people means that they receive the grace and favour of God. Next, for someone to 'bless' another means that the one offers the other their own good will in whatever appropriate form it is expressed. Lastly, for someone to bless God means that they offer their best and their own favourable response to God, something we usually call 'praise'.

So here in this story, Elizabeth's blessing of Mary when filled with the Holy Spirit, means that she offers Mary her own goodwill and favour, but also by means of the Holy Spirit, she offers God's blessing and favour. The notes written above also indicate the likelihood that Elizabeth described Mary as 'most blessed' among women. This blessing has caused significant interest because those who promote what is called 'Marion devotion', suggest this constitutes clear evidence of Mary's superiority over all other women. I suggest that this takes the matter too far. The blessing of one person by another has nothing to do with status, and everything to do with humility. The fact that Mary is 'most blessed' does not make her any better than the rest of us, her blessing is a simple statement of a wonderful fact. God has blessed her in a unique way because she is the mother of Jesus, God's Son, and no other woman has that privilege. She remains a woman with the same propensity to human sinfulness as every other man or woman on earth, as God has ordained for every human being.

Application

At this point in Luke's Gospel, the Holy Spirit brings order and understanding to the whole sequence of stories in the opening chapter. God was of course at work in everything that was happening; but the Holy Spirit worked within both Elizabeth and Mary to make the spiritual connections. It is simply impossible to draw simple connections between the events described in this passage and the life of God's people today, largely because what we have read here is an unrepeatable event and the special nature of God's work is clear. However, I venture to suggest that the Holy Spirit is involved in the creation of each and every individual in the womb, and God's people should be willing to speak about this boldly in an age in which people regard procreative activity as something little more than a recreational sport. The spiritual nature of each human being is highly valuable, and we cannot afford to ignore this.

The second point of connection between this story and ourselves is the nature of the spiritual connection between Mary and Elizabeth. Most of us know what it is like to feel that we have people who are close; we call such people 'soul friends', a phrase that has gained some recognition and attained general use amongst some. The word 'soul' however, means little more than 'everything that make an individual' in the Bible, but to talk about the 'spirit' we possess in Christ is quite different. I would rather we talk about 'friends in the spirit' or 'spirit friends' when speaking of those to whom we feel a spiritual connection because of the mutual recognition of the work of God's Spirit.

Of course, the Holy Spirit is at work throughout our world, and in all people in some measure. Even those who have not professed faith are the subject of the work of the Spirit to draw them to Christ, whether they

recognise it or not. But I reckon that God is entirely understanding of the personal circumstances that existed between Mary and Elizabeth, and may also exist between us and certain others, enabling us to appreciate the godliness of others and the spiritual connections we enjoy. The Lord can and will use all forms of our friendship to His glory if we allow Him to work in them by His Holy Spirit.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What does the term 'filled with the Holy Spirit' mean here in this passage, and what does this same expression mean to us today?
2. Share experiences you have had in which you have been surprised and grateful for what the Lord has done for you
3. How can we be confident that God will fulfil His promises? Discuss this with reference to your experience of unanswered prayer.

Topics covered by this text

- *The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer*
- *The relationship of John the Baptist and Jesus*
- *The blessing of the Messiah by Elizabeth*

Personal comments by author

Elizabeth encouraged Mary to believe that what she had been told would indeed come true, and in saying this she offered Mary important and significant support and faith. We all need the help and support of others in our faith, but ultimately, the Holy Spirit is the one who works within us to enable us to receive this encouragement. We all know what it is like to offer encouragement and find that it has not been received! In this story, the Holy Spirit was at work in both Elizabeth and Mary, and this is what makes the story so special.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How do you recognise the work of the Holy Spirit within your own life and that of others? Make sure that your understanding of this is Biblical and seek to find evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit that you have not seen before.*
- *Pray that God's people will hear and read the story of the birth of Jesus with greater understanding this year, and be inspired by what they hear and read.*

Final Prayer

We thank You, Almighty God, for the gift of faith. You have accepted us on the basis of our faith, and yet it is You who have placed faith within us! Give us the grace to continue to live by faith, to demonstrate our faith and to witness to our faith throughout our lives. Thank You, Almighty God: AMEN
