

Mary Visits Elisabeth (Luke 1:39-56)

Sunday school April 24, 2016

I want to call your attention this morning to **READ Luke 1:39-45** (I don't think I can get 45 minutes worth of stuff out of these 7 verses, but we'll see.) We've spent the last 3 Sundays studying the angelic announcements given first to Zacharias concerning his son John the Baptist and then to Mary concerning her son Jesus. As we noted last week, those two accounts are similar, but there are some significant differences. Zacharias was an old priest doing his usual God-appointed duties in the temple in Jerusalem, the center of the world from the Jewish perspective. He's just going about his priestly business when the angel appears to him in the temple and says, "your prayer has been heard. You're going to have a son, and he's going to be a great one who will lead many of God's people to turn back to God." Zacharias responded with unbelief, he asked for a sign, and as a result he temporarily became dumb, unable to talk. So that's what happened to Zacharias and Elisabeth.

Mary, on the other hand, was a peasant girl, probably 12-13 years old, out in the boondocks of Galilee. The same angel appears to her, tells her she is highly favored with God, and that she will conceive as a virgin. I noted last week that the two birth narratives (Matthew and Luke) clearly and specifically tell us 6 times that Mary was a sexual virgin when she conceived. So people who try to deny the virgin birth have no scriptural basis on which to stand. The angel goes on to tell her that her baby will also be great, in fact greater than John the Baptist. Her baby, Jesus, would be the Son of the Highest and reign eternally. We noted the messianic language there. The last thing we saw last time was Mary's response: she responds in faith, "be it according to thy word." In the verses we are going to start with today, verses 39-45, we see the beginning of the fulfillment of these angelic visions. I would say these are the second signs (Zacharias becoming dumb and Elisabeth conceiving were the first signs) that what the angel said will, in fact, come to pass.

Transition: So let me HAND OUT OUTLINES. The first thing we have is...

I. Mary's Journey READ v. 39-40 After Mary receives her vision, she almost immediately heads about 70 miles south to Judah, the area around Jerusalem, to visit Elisabeth. Verse 36, which I had to rush through at the end of the hour last week, tells us they were cousins. You have to be careful with that: the Greek word translated "cousin" can be used to signify a wide variety of family relations. Sometimes it means cousin, like we use the word today. Sometimes it means aunt, or *ant* if you're from my part of the world. Sometimes it means other family relations. The point is Mary and Elisabeth were related, and they knew they were related. We don't know why Mary went to see Elisabeth: the angel didn't tell her to go. This kind of a journey for a young lady who was espoused would have been very unusual. In those days a young lady who was espoused would normally have been kept in seclusion in her parents' home not even allowed to go out and about the town. That was done to protect and ensure their virginity until they were married. Don't you wish you could do that to some kids these days; you can't go outside until you're married.

In the culture of their day, if you had two people of unequal social rank, it was customary for the lesser to visit the greater. It's still kind of that way today. If the Provost at Anderson University wants to meet with me, he's not going to come to my office. He's going to call me to his office. So, following that custom, Mary going to visit Elisabeth identifies Mary as the lesser and Elisabeth as the greater. In their current status, that was definitely the case. Elisabeth was much older. She was in the priestly line and married to a priest. Mary was a young peasant girl, which was almost as low on the social totem pole as you could get. But if you compare the sons they are about to have, Mary was actually the greater because Jesus was going to be greater than John the Baptist. This reminds us that God's order does not follow the human order. In Mark 9:35, Jesus said, "If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all." In the human order, the lesser serves the greater. Jesus said, "my kingdom doesn't work that way. In my kingdom, we're all servants of each other, and we're all servants of God." That reverberates to us in the church today. We don't lord over each other like the world does; we serve each other. If we're not willing to serve each other, then we can't be great in the kingdom of God. Mary was the lesser in human terms, but in God's sight she was actually greater.

Transition: Next item,...

II. Elisabeth's Blessings In verses 41-45 Elisabeth gives Mary two different blessings. The word "blessed" appears once (actually twice) in verse 42, so that's the first blessing. It appears again down in verse 45; that's the second blessing. These two blessings are given for two very different reasons, so let's take one at a time. First, we have...

IIA. Mary's Motherhood READ v. 41-44 Verse 41 tells us that Elisabeth was "filled with the Holy Ghost" when she spoke these words, so these are inspired words. The Holy Spirit gave her the ability to interpret the movement of John in her womb. From Elisabeth's perspective, this was the beginning of the fulfillment of the angel's prophecy concerning her son John. If you look back to verse 15, the angel says concerning John, "and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb." Here John is still in the womb, so He wasn't able to make a rational intelligent decision on his own, but he's already moving under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As a side note, this incident is one that is commonly used in the abortion debate to build a scriptural argument that life begins at conception and not at birth; Jeremiah 1:5 is another. John hadn't been born yet, but he is already being used by the Holy Spirit.

From Mary's perspective, this incident and Elisabeth's interpretation thereof serve as confirmation of the words the angel had spoken concerning Jesus. Many of the phrases Elisabeth uses are similar to the ones Gabriel used. In verse 42, Elisabeth says, "Blessed art thou among women." In verse 28, at the end of the verse, Gabriel said, "blessed art thou among women." In verse 43, Elisabeth calls Mary the "mother of my Lord" with a capital L. In verses 32 and 33, Gabriel says "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: 33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." We unpacked the messianic meaning in those phrases last week. So Mary hadn't asked for any confirmation or any sign; she just said, "Be it according to thy word," but God gives her one anyway. This reminds us that God because of His goodness gives us what we need even if we fail to ask for it. James says, "Ye have not because ye ask not." That's often true, but sometimes God gives it to us anyway. When my mom got sick, I didn't ask God for a cat. I was just sitting in my living room one day and this black cat jumps up on the ledge outside my window and starts meowing at me. It's one of my neighbors' cats, and it's become a good friend of mine since. It spends more time at my house than at her real house these days. I didn't ask for a cat, but God knew I would get lonely, so He sent me a cat. God gives us what we need even if we don't ask for it like we should. Mary didn't ask for a confirmation, but God gave it to her anyway.

Transition: That was Elisabeth's first blessing. Her second blessing is for...

IIB. Mary's Faith READ v. 45 There's a subtle grammatical difference between the blessing in verse 42 and the one in verse 45. In verse 42, Elisabeth says, "Blessed art thou...." That's second person, meaning it's directed to Mary, the person directly in front of her. In verse 45, Elisabeth says, "blessed is *she* that believed." That's third person. The "she" immediately in view is Mary of course, but this blessing is not limited to Mary: it's to anyone who believes. Jesus uses the same rhetorical technique in the Beatitudes in His Sermon on the Mount. Almost all of the beatitudes are written in third person: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The "poor in spirit" immediately in view were Jesus' mostly Jewish audience, but the blessing applies to everyone who meets the criterion, including us today. The point is: Elisabeth, as moved by the Holy Spirit, says "if you believe God's word, you are blessed." Why? Look at the end of verse 45: "for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord." If you believe God's word, you are blessed because it will surely come to pass. You don't have to worry about false hope or things going off the rails. God has everything under control; things happen when He wants them to. So the message of this passage to us is: believe God's word like Mary did, and you will be blessed.

Transition: Well, I didn't think I could get 45 minutes out of those 7 verses, so let's start but probably not finish the next block of text. This is...

III. Mary's Response (to her Conception) READ v. 46-56 These verses form the first of 4 hymns that are found in Luke's birth narrative, chapters 1 and 2. It reads a lot like an Old Testament Psalm. Verses 46-47 give praise to God, and then the rest of the hymn give the reasons for the praise. Some other denominations call this hymn the Magnificat; that's the Latin for the first phrase in the hymn "My soul doth magnify." I used to have a hard time remembering the word Magnificat, and then as I was preparing this lesson I looked down at my neighbor's cat, the one I mentioned before that spends more time at my house than at her real house. She was laying at my feet quietly purring. I rubbed her soft black fur, and I thought, "This is a pretty magnificent cat. She's a magnificat!" I'll never forget that title again.

Transition: The hymn starts with...

IIIA. God's Exaltation READ v. 46-47 The thing that strikes me most about these verses and really the entire hymn is that almost all of the language in this hymn appears in the Old Testament, usually the psalms. For example, the first phrase is "My soul doth magnify the Lord." That's almost the same as Psalms 34:2 says, "My soul shall make her boast in the LORD:" The next phrase is "my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." Similarly, Habakkuk 3:18, a psalmic-type prayer that is not in the psalms, says, "Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation." That's the same thing. Almost all of the Psalms references I gave you in your outlines are places where the psalms say pretty much word for word what Mary says in this hymn. The point is that when Mary writes a hymn exalting and praising God, she uses the Old Testament, the only scripture that had been given at that time, to do it. Reading scripture is a good way to get yourself thinking spiritually, thinking about God. When I sit down to prepare a Sunday school lesson, I usually spend the first 15-20 minutes reading scripture. The scripture I read is not the passage I plan to teach from (the second thing I usually do is read passage I intend to teach carefully several times), and usually it is completely unrelated to what I plan to teach. Yesterday when I sat down to prepare this lesson I read Exodus 33 and 34, which speaks of Moses' relationship with God. It doesn't matter where you turn in scripture, all scripture speaks of either 1) the goodness of God, or 2) the greatness of God, or 3) both. So if you want to praise God better, read and use more scripture. That's what Mary does, and it's what we need to do today.

Transition: Next part...

IIIB. God's Regards READ v. 48-50 The word "handmaiden" in verse 48 hearkens back to verse 38, where Mary said to the angel "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." Just as I commented in that verse last week, it carries the idea of servanthood. Mary views herself as a servant. Remember that Mary was a young peasant girl from the boondocks of Galilee. She wasn't born in a wealthy, powerful family. She hadn't done anything to deserve God's favor. There wasn't anything special about her other than she was faithful. In contrast to her "low estate" in verse 48, verse 49 presents God as mighty and holy. Back when we studied the armor of God at the tail end of our Ephesians study a few months ago, I mentioned that the only person who has any real power is God. He gives some of us some to use for a time, but Psalm 62:11 says, "God hath spoken once; twice have I heard this; that power belongeth unto God." That's why it was important that the armor in Ephesians 6 is the armor "of God." If it's going to have any power and be effective, the armor has to come from Him. The amazing and wonderful thing is, in spite of how mighty and powerful God is, He still regards and gives mercy to people like Mary and us who, compared to Him, are of low estate. We haven't done anything to deserve the great things He has done for us, but He does great things for us and is merciful to us because of how good He is. That's God regarding people like us of low estate.

Transition: The next point is related to this. It is...

IIIC. God's Power READ v. 51 Starting in verse 50 there is a shift from language that is personal to language that is more general. There's a lot of first person in verses 46-49. In verse 46, the hymn starts, "my soul." Verse 47: "my spirit, my saviour." At the end of verse 48: "me blessed." Verse 49: "done to me great things." After verse 49, there is no more first person. So there is a shift from what God has done for Mary specifically to what He does for His people in general. In particular, verse 51 talks about the "strength of his arm." That's a metaphor: God is spirit, so He does not have a physical arm, but His arm represents God's strength and power. In the Old Testament, this metaphor was often used in describing God delivering His people out of bondage in Egypt. For example, in Exodus 3:19-20, God is speaking to Moses out of the burning bush, and He says, "And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand. 20 And I will stretch out my hand, and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in the midst thereof: and after that he will let you go." The point is God's power is a lot greater than the power of any man.

Transition: Because of how good God is and the power God has, next we have...

IIID. God's Help READ v. 52-53 Notice in these verses that God is the one who is acting, not humans. You've probably heard the phrase, "God helps those who help themselves." I prefer the phrase, "God helps those who can't help themselves." Psalms 68:5-6 say, "A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation. 6 God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land." Orphans, widows, and enslaved people are defenseless through their own means, but God defends them. Before I trusted Christ I could not do anything to pay for my sins. I couldn't help myself, but God did: when we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He lifts those of low estate and fills the hungry; He helps those who can't help themselves.

Transition: Last point...

IIIE. God's Remembrance READ v. 54-56 I mentioned before that the name Zacharias translates to "God remembers." These verses in particular state that God remembered His people, at that time Israel, and He remembered the promises He made to them. He still does that today. He remembers us and the promises He made to us.

Conclusion

As a final thought on this text, the main emphasis in this hymn is on God, what He has done, and what He continues to do. Our worship should be the same way. One of the flaws in a lot of the modern music is that it talks too much about us and our love for Him. I'd rather talk about God and His love for me. When I give my testimony, I always start with a phrase about Him like "only God is good." Mary's praises use scripture to talk about God, who He is and what He does; our praises should do the same.