



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 1:39-56

To understand the role of the Holy Spirit and the kingdom principle first spelled out in *Mary's Magnificat*.

The Line That Rocked the World

The year was 1981. People waited with great angst for the highly anticipated opening of *The Empire Strikes Back*. When *A New Hope* came out in 1971 (then only billed as *Star Wars*), no one knew how big of an impact the movie franchise would make, but by 1981 it was clear - *Star Wars* was here to stay. There were approximately three people, however, in the opening premiere who knew about the movie's biggest kept secret: Darth Vader, the movie's villain, was the father of the story's hero, Luke Skywalker. Even the main actors (i.e. Harrison Ford) in the movie were kept in the dark. In the script, the writers had written an alternate line for that scene except for Mark Hamill's version of it, which had an addendum that added the *actual* line. The line, "No, I am your father" has become one of the most iconic (and also misquoted) lines in cinema history, and the connection between Luke and Anakin changed the dynamic of the story entirely.

A lot of attention is given to developing Zechariah and Elizabeth and particularly Elizabeth's pregnancy with John, but it seems rather strange at first. Why are we given so much information about these two? What is so special about them? How do they connect to the Jesus narrative? Obviously John will eventually become John the Baptizer, and he will herald the coming of Jesus, but why spend time on his parents? It becomes clear in verse 36 when we find out that Elizabeth is not just some random woman, but a relative of Mary! The family connection changes the dynamic of the story. John will not just be a random person that God raises up to prepare the way for the Lord, but will be a part of the Lord's human family, and both Mary and Elizabeth will share their experiences with one another as chosen vessels for God's plan and purpose.

Mary's Visit

The passage begins with Mary frantically on the move: "In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth" (Lk. 1:39-40). Why is she in such a hurry? She is responding eagerly to the news she received in verse 36, regarding her well-documented barren relative who is now in her 6th month of pregnancy. This can only be the work of God, and Mary wants to see it for herself. Given the news she just received from an angel about her own impending pregnancy, there is a deep sense of curiosity in Mary to investigate. Below are a few details about her visit.

HILL COUNTRY

Luke doesn't give the exact name of the city where Elizabeth and Zechariah live. Either he didn't feel like the details were of great importance, or more likely he chose to use terminology that was reminiscent of Samuel's birth. Samuel's dad is described in 1 Samuel 1:1: "Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim-zophim from the hill country of Ephraim." Given that Mary's Magnificat in the following verses have a great deal in common with Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2, it might be that Luke is introducing the Samuel connection in the wording here.

A LEAPING BABY

Just as John the Baptizer will prepare the way for the Lord in his earthy ministry, he is already here able to recognize the presence of the Messiah, but how? Recall verse 15: "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb." John is able to discern the presence of Jesus for two reasons: 1. He is alive (because life begins at conception, not birth), and 2. The Holy Spirit is the means by which he is able to distinguish Christ in the womb of Mary. This passage demonstrates both that the child in the womb is indeed alive and able to be used of God while also showing the intricate connection between the baby and the mom. It was upon *Elizabeth* (and not John) hearing the greeting of Mary that John responded.

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Just as the Holy Spirit gives John the ability to recognize the presence of Jesus, the Spirit gives all people the ability to recognize Jesus. Apart from the work of the Spirit, we will not get Jesus right. This is worked out in the writings of Paul, but even here Elizabeth receives the Holy Spirit as well upon John's movement, and she is also able to rightly discern the presence of the Lord: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me" (Lk. 1:42-43). The role of the Holy Spirit cannot be understated here, because apart from the Spirit people are not able to spiritually discern anything (1 Cor. 2:14).

Mary's Song

Mary's song is often referred to as the *Magnificat*, which is derived from the Latin (Vulgate) translation of verse 46: "Magnificat anima mea Dominum" ("My soul magnifies the Lord"). The song or prayer is one of gratitude. Below is a breakdown of some keywords in this passage.

SAVIOR

While the word "savior" is not a surprising term for us in Christendom, it is scarcely used in Luke's Gospel. It is only found twice: Once in verse 47 ("God my Savior"), and once in Luke 2:11: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." That Mary is clearly referring to God as Savior in the Magnificat, and that Luke chooses to use it only one other time in the announcement of Jesus' birth is a clear argument for the deity of Christ.

HUMBLE ESTATE

The word used for “humble estate” in verse 48 is the word that literally translates as, “depression, abject condition.” It’s a word that indicates that Mary does not see herself as one who possesses power or any kind of advantage over everyone else. That God has chosen her then should be seen as *shocking*, and yet she says “from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48), a statement that is still true to this day (albeit sometimes to the detriment of idolatry).

THE HAND OF GOD

Mary’s emphasis over her lowly state becomes a theme for the latter half of the Magnificat wherein God flips the world upside down. The proud and powerful are brought low by the hand of God (vs.51-52) and the poor and needy are lifted up (vs.53-54). This is a foreshadowing of the coming kingdom of God as well. Jesus’ birth is the event that sets the kingdom into motion and turns what we think is right upside down. It won’t be the world leaders that change the world, but “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27). In many ways, Mary represents all of God’s people in that God uses the least likely individuals to accomplish His will.

What About Now?

There is, again, a reminder that a baby in the womb is indeed alive and connected to the mother’s faculties such that when the mother does something or experiences something, so does the baby (John responds to Elizabeth hearing the voice of Mary). There is also the reminder to us that God chooses the weak and foolish things of the world to accomplish His will. It’s so typical of us to place expectations on ourselves where God doesn’t; He only needs those who are available, humble, and willing to relinquish control over their lives.

Study Questions**Day One**

1. Read Luke 1:39-40. Where did Mary go? What house did she enter? Why do you suppose she went “with haste?”

2. Read Luke 1:41-42. What happened to the baby in Elizabeth’s womb when she heard the voice of Mary? What happened to Elizabeth? What did Elizabeth say following receiving the Holy Spirit? What does this indicate about the work of the Holy Spirit?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 1:43-45. What does Elizabeth say in verse 43? What is she recognizing in this statement? Summarize in your own words verses 44 and 45.

2. Read Luke 1:46-48. What did Mary say first? How does she refer to God? How does she refer to herself?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 1:49-50. How is God described in these verses? Who does His mercy fall on?

2. Read Luke 1:51-53. Who does He scatter? Who does He bring low? Who does He exalt?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 1:54-55. On what basis has He helped Israel? In your own word, write what that means.

2. Read Luke 1:56. How long did Mary remain with Elizabeth?

Week 4 Discussion: The Weak and Foolish

Mary's *Magnificat* reinforces the kingdom principle that God uses the weak and foolish things of the world to confound the wise (1 Cor. 1:26-29). Mary was looked upon in her "humble estate" and yet "all generations" will call her blessed (Lk. 1:48). God will bring low the proud and the mighty and He will "exalt" those in need (Lk. 1:52-53). Talk as a group about this principle, and how it shapes the way you see yourself and your pursuit of Godliness.

1. Icebreaker: Do you see yourself as "weak and foolish" or "strong and wise?"
2. Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-28. Why do you suppose God chooses to operate in this manner? (Hint: Read verse 29)
3. How do you balance being "foolish" and also "increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10)?
4. Read Proverbs 1:7. What is necessary before you can grow in the knowledge of God?
5. Being "weak and foolish" means becoming dependent on God, not yourself. Do you agree or disagree with this? Why?
6. How can the church be a safer place for the weak and foolish people of the world?

Takeaways:

1. Mary goes to see Elizabeth, and John the Baptizer leaps at the sound of her voice.
2. Elizabeth receives the Holy Spirit.
3. Mary's *Magnificat* is not only about how God chose her, but how God chooses the most unexpected and least qualified individuals for His purposes.