



Luke 1:38–44

38 ‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her. 39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: ‘Blessed are

you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Reflection

Halfway through the first chapter of his gospel Luke has made one thing abundantly clear – the greatest news ever proclaimed to Israel has come to its humblest people. Luke has set before our eyes an elderly couple and a teenage girl, inconsequential in the world's eyes, but soon to be extraordinarily blessed by God because of their faith in him and because God's power is made perfect our weak-

ness. Today we turn our attention to two of these: Mary and to Elizabeth.

And it is worth briefly noting here the way that Luke transcends the first century's neglect of women. We hear the names of more woman in Luke than in any other Gospel: Mary, Elizabeth, Anna, Martha, her sister Mary, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, the widow of Nain who gave all she had, the daughters of Jerusalem and the many women in Jesus' parables. We might barely notice this in our culture today, but if this is the case then it is because of what Jesus began in his day. For Luke, Jesus friend of sinners, is also the one who especially cares for women. And Jesus' care of women, his teaching and his actions heralded the reversal of systematic inequality that Christianity would

bring.¹

Let's firstly take Mary for example. We're barely halfway through the first chapter of Luke's Gospel and it is impossible not to compare her with Zechariah. In parallel accounts, Luke has shown us how the angel Gabriel appeared suddenly to them both, declaring the fulfilment of all God's promises in the Old Testament, and promising each of them in unlikely circumstances (the one in extreme old age and the other a virgin) that God would give them a child who would respectively go on to become the greatest prophet ever to walk the earth and the Messiah, the Son of God and Saviour of the world. Two parallel encounters. For Zechariah the disgrace of barrenness would finally be lifted from his household;

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Preaching the word; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 19.

for Mary the disgrace of unmarried pregnancy would threaten all she holds dear. And yet the responses of these two humble and faithful people, a priest no less, and a peasant girl, couldn't be more contrasted. Zechariah asks for a sign in his unbelief, Luke 1:18,

‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.’

But listen to Mary, a young teenager who stands to lose everything, reading from today's passage, Luke 1:38–44,

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hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

I'm not sure we can spend enough time considering Mary's response to all that Gabriel has told her. In contrast to Zechariah, in contrast to the many, many people right

throughout Scripture who demand signs from God to prove that what he has said to them is true, Mary simply says to Gabriel after receiving the most stupendous news of anyone in all of human history to date, verse 38,

38 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'

There can be no question that the Roman Catholic church departs from the teachings of Scripture and makes Mary into someone she is not. The woman who uttered these words in verse 38 stands horrified and deeply saddened in heaven at talk of her own immaculate conception, her perpetual virginity, and at teaching that portrays her as a dispenser of grace

and co-redeemer with her son, and as an object of our prayers and worship. I can only imagine how distressed Mary must be as she stands in heaven watching millions upon millions of people confused about Jesus and putting their faith in her because of doctrines made up by the Roman Catholic church that openly contradict Scripture.

But there can also be no question that the Protestant church, in response, have neglected Mary's exemplary faith; something the Gospel of Luke is at pains to redress. Could there be a more exemplary example of Christian faith and trust in God than Mary's early life? Later, as we all do, she would slip up once or twice but in the end Mary stood at the foot of the cross and was counted amongst the very first members

of the Christian church. Her sons went on to die for the sins of the world, to preside over the church in Jerusalem and to write books of the Bible (sons, by-the-by, who would have been pretty hard to conceive if she had remained in a state of perpetual virginity!). And certainly, in Luke chapters 1 & 2 we see her exemplary, childlike faith for which Jesus would later have the highest regard (Matt 18:2–3). Luke portrays Mary as favoured by God (1:30); thoughtful (1:29; 2:19, 51), believing (1:45), worshipful (1:46), and devoted to Jewish law and piety (2:22–51) despite her young age, and her lack of education and advantage. There is much to be admired and emulated in the youthful Mary’s response to the word of our God.²

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke (Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching; Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1990)*, 27–28.

Elizabeth, Mary's cousin thinks so too. Just listen to her in the remainder of our passage.

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It's hard to imagine the change in Elizabeth's countenance. Verse 25 gave us the best window,

25 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.'

And today we find her filled with the Holy Spirit, God's promise alive and growing in her womb. In three months she will give birth to the greatest prophet ever to walk the earth (Jesus' words, not mine), to John the Baptist, who will prepare the way for the Lord. And yet still this beautiful woman of faith is not proud. She's as humble as ever. Did you hear her?

‘Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the child you will
bear! 43 But why am I so favoured,
that the mother of my Lord should
come to me?

And the son in her own womb, who was
filled the same Holy Spirit even before he
was born, leapt for joy at both Mary’s ar-
rival and the humility of his mum.

Think & Pray

Spend some time today picturing the em-
brace of these two women. Imagine their
shared stories, their anticipation of the
promises surrounding the sons they are
about to bring into the world. Reflect over
their humility and how God bends to bless
these two seeming inconsequential wom-

en. Consider again our God who alone can bring something out of nothing, who brings life out of death; fertility from a barren woman and a virgin birth.

Then close in prayer as you imagine these two women would have prayed together that day.