

Elisabeth: The First Person to Worship Jesus

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And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and greeted Elisabeth. And it came to pass that, when Elisabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she spoke out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy greeting sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden; for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shown strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath helped his servant, Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever. (Luke 1:39-55)

I venture that you have never heard a Christmas message on this particular passage of Scripture. I think there's a twofold reason why it is seldom used at Christmastime. First of all it does not seem to be relevant to the Christmas story. And second, it has been considered the private domain of the Roman Catholic Church. But if we're to consider the Christmas story in depth, we can no longer ignore this passage, for I believe it is vital to a proper perspective of the total Christmas story.

Only Dr. Luke records this particular episode. And if you have not yet met Dr. Luke, let me introduce him to you. I think it would be appropriate to give a thumbnail sketch of the man whom God chose to record the third Gospel, because we should know something about him.

Dr. Luke, first of all, was a physician. Actually, he used more medical terms than Hippocrates, the founder of modern medicine. And Dr. Luke was a Gentile. I had not been convinced of that until recently in the study of this particular passage, and now I'm confident that Dr. Luke was a Gentile. Over in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Colossians Paul lists a whole company of Christians – first, those who are, as he says, among “the circumcision” – and he concludes this first list with Justus, “who are of the circumcision. These only are my fellow workers unto the kingdom of God, who have been a comfort unto me” (Colossians 4:11). He has listed those who are of the circumcision; that is, they were Jews. Then secondly he names Gentiles, beginning with Epaphras, and in this list of Gentiles he includes “Luke, the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14). So it is obvious that Dr. Luke was a Gentile.

And Dr. Luke also was an accurate historian. Sir William Ramsay went to the Bible Lands to disprove Dr. Luke's record because he felt that all historians are liars. Now that's interesting, and I agree with him. They always bring into their writings their personal bias and prejudice, and sometimes they misrepresent the facts. But Sir Ramsay found, when he followed the journeys of Paul in the Book of Acts, that Dr. Luke was one of the most accurate of historians, and he could not find one discrepancy in anything that he had written. For this reason, Sir William Ramsay, who began as a skeptic, became a believer in Christ.

Another point of interest is that Dr. Luke wrote the best Greek that we have in the New Testament. He was an intellectual and belonged to that group. Luke was also a poet. He had an artistic nature, and he was a man of culture. He probably was of Greek descent, and that tremendous Greek civilization stood in the background of this man.

The Songs of Christmas

Our Lord chose such a man to give us the songs of Christmas. The fact of the matter is, Luke was the only one who recorded them. He wrote the Beatitude of Elisabeth, the Magnificat of Mary, the Benedictus of Zacharias, the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon, the Evangel of the angel, and the Gloria in Excelsis of the angelic host. He alone records all of these. And today we are going to consider the first two of those songs, the Beatitude of Elisabeth, and the Magnificat of Mary.

After the angel Gabriel had brought the message of redeeming love and the remembered joyful concern of God for man – first to Zacharias, then to Mary, and then to Joseph – it was time for man to respond. It was time for man to break forth in song – only it was the women who broke forth in song. And as our story unfolds, you will see that it is essentially a woman’s story.

We will go to Nazareth first, before we go to Bethlehem, to get the story that I believe is the background of all the momentous events of the Incarnation.

Now it’s naturally assumed that when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary she immediately fled down to the hill country of Judah, to the home of Zacharias and Elisabeth. May I say to you that I do not think it happened that way. I am inclined to believe that after the appearance of Gabriel to Mary, she remained in Nazareth. Then Gabriel appeared to Joseph. Since they were engaged, and the engagement was as binding as marriage in that day, Joseph would consummate that engagement by the marriage ceremony.

And Nazareth became hostile. Good people shunned Mary. They avoided her. She saw only unsympathetic eyes that shot out cold glances of rebuke at her. It was a field day for gossips in Nazareth. There were whispers and rumors and suspicion. Someone has said that God made the country, man made the city, but the devil made the little town. Nazareth was a little town. And they talked. There was no sympathetic understanding of her position, and she could not explain it. What could she say? Let me ask you a very frank and fair question: If you had lived in Nazareth in that day, would you have believed her? Would you? Give me an honest answer. Of course you wouldn’t. And I want to say to you, I don’t think I would have believed her.

Now this young woman is going to flee from Nazareth to get away from it. She doesn’t want pity. When you are right you never want pity. You want sympathy. And Mary needs sympathy, and she needs to think. After all, this is a tremendous thing that is happening to her. She needs human help, and where is she to turn for it?

Mary needs someone to talk to, she needs someone who will listen to her with understanding – and who is better to do that than Elisabeth because the angel Gabriel had already told Mary about her:

And, behold, thy cousin, Elisabeth, hath also conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. (Luke 1:36)

Since Elisabeth is six months along at this time, John the Baptist is to be born within three months or less. But the interesting thing is, Zacharias cannot speak since he was made dumb by unbelief. I have a notion he would write out what he had to say to Mary, but Elisabeth

is the one who will do the talking. And what sweet fellowship they will have together. I think the coming together of these mothers is one of the loveliest meetings ever recorded.

And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and greeted Elisabeth.
(Luke 1:39, 40)

Notice the greeting:

And it came to pass that, when Elisabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. (Luke 1:41)

Now I do not propose to explain this. We're living in a day when even those who claim to believe the Bible like to reach out for some broken reed to lean on – that is, they try to find a natural explanation.

Some years ago an astronomer, and he's a Christian, came out with an explanation of how the guiding star that first Christmas appeared. He said it was the coming together of Venus and Jupiter. I'd like him to explain to me how that star led the wise men from Jerusalem down to Bethlehem. I don't think Venus and Jupiter would help them very much.

Even with modern gadgets today, you couldn't get that kind of leading from Venus and Jupiter. May I say to you, the only explanation of the Christmas story is that it's supernatural, and either you believe it or you don't believe it, which means that either you believe God or you don't believe God. And God has laid it right out there for the unbelieving world today.

I'm not trying to explain this, but when Mary arrives unannounced and enters the home of Zacharias and Elisabeth and calls out a greeting, the babe leaps – as Elisabeth said – leaps for joy in her womb! Elisabeth, at least six months pregnant, hurries to greet her, knowing what God is preparing to do, and she's filled with the Holy Spirit, we're told. The babe leaps with joy, and he is filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb!

Now I do not care to argue the point with anyone. To me it's a closed issue. But may I make a suggestion. Last Sunday evening I dedicated several of the most precious youngsters I have ever seen. They always are that way. As I hold in my arms each little bundle of life for a prayer of dedication – one of them hadn't been in this world but just a few weeks – I feel as I look down into the faces of those little ones that they know something I don't know. You say, "If they do, they would talk." No, they won't. I feel like asking them the question, "Where did you come from, baby dear?" And don't give me that "out of the everywhere into the here" answer because that doesn't tell me a thing. We in this materialistic age are concerned with things and not with spiritual matters. I don't think that we even understand the words of William Wordsworth when he said,

*Trailing clouds of glory, do we come
From God who is our Home.*

And George McDonald said concerning Him,

*My how or when thou wilt not heed,
But came down thine own secret stair,
That thou mayest answer all my need,*

Yea, every bygone prayer.

He came down His secret stair. Where did you come from, Baby dear? Those little babies who were here last week, born into our materialistic age, they'll grow up as materialistic as we are, I guess. May I say to you, there are a lot of answers that you and I don't have today, even in this scientific age. I leave it there. And I think the reverent soul will bow and worship.

Elisabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognized that Mary was forming beneath her heart the humanity of Jesus, the Savior. The Son of God was being formed there, and Mary was the earthly tabernacle. As Elisabeth said, "The mother of my Lord."

And that is what Mary was, just a tabernacle. Back in the days of the tabernacle of old, the children of Israel did not believe that they were to worship it, and they did not. And later, when they built the temple, neither did they worship the temple. They worshiped the One who met with them in the temple. And Elisabeth is not worshiping Mary. She says to her, "Blessed art thou *among* women," not above women. Just because Mary brought the Savior into the world did not put her on a pedestal, but she lifted up all womanhood and all motherhood! That is what she did. The Christmas story is a woman's story. A man had nothing to do with it.

Beatitude of Elisabeth

And so Elisabeth is the first to worship the Savior, and He's not yet born! Elisabeth burst into the first song of worship:

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Luke 1:42, 43)

But Mary, this young woman from Nazareth, needed help. This tremendous thing has overwhelmed her. I do not know how to say this. It's indescribable, it's delicate. But will you look at the scene for a moment, and I'll do the best I can. Elisabeth is carrying in her womb the last prophet of the Old Testament dispensation. The last voice of the Old Testament was John the Baptist. And I tell you, what a voice he was! "Prepare the way!" he thundered.

Here was his answer on one occasion:

John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to loose; he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (Luke 3:16)

When they came to John the Baptist later on and said, "You are fading, and He's increasing," he answered, "That's the way it should be – He must increase but I must decrease."

But here at the very beginning we see Elisabeth, John's mother, worshiping the One who is to usher in the new dispensation. She sings the first song of worship, this beatitude, and it's lovely.

And she spoke out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Luke 1:42, 43)

“Blessed is the fruit of your womb,” that is, “blessed is this little one who is coming into the world!” And you Mary, are His tabernacle, “the mother of my Lord.”

You don’t go in on Sunday to worship the church, do you? It may be a lovely auditorium, but I hope you’re not worshipping the church building. I hope you worship the Savior who is to be proclaimed in His church. But give Elisabeth credit for that also, for that’s exactly what she’s doing.

For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy greeting sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. (Luke 1:44, 45)

Little is said in Scripture about Elisabeth. She sang the first song of the New Testament, and when you have a soloist like this, you should not ignore her. She is a remarkable person. She had faith while her husband Zacharias did not. He was struck dumb because of his unbelief, but Elisabeth was not. She believed God. Now she encourages Mary. Mary is a young woman and Elisabeth is an old woman. Elisabeth had walked with God for many years, and she assures Mary that there would be a performance of those things which had been revealed to her. I would like to give Elisabeth a little credit along with the others. She should not be deified, of course. She was only a woman, just as Mary was only a woman. And Mary needed the encouragement that Elisabeth could give.

The Magnificat of Mary

Now Mary responds, and we have the Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55. The entire Magnificat breathes the Old Testament. The one who gave this was obviously well acquainted with the Old Testament. Mary knew the Scriptures.

And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden; for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. (Luke 1:46-48)

Now Mary sings a song. This song teaches us several interesting things. Mary tells us in her song that she needed a Savior and that she rejoiced in Him. Protestant friend, let us call her blessed. We don’t make her a goddess and kneel before her, but we do need to call her blessed. It was her glorious privilege to be the mother of the Son of God, to bring Him into the world. We should not play it down, but we should not play it up either. She was a wonderful person, and it was no accident that she was chosen by God. It was His definite decision, and God makes no mistakes.

Now will you notice as I lift out three statements. First of all, and this is quite remarkable, Mary begins her song:

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.
(Luke 1:46, 47)

Mary needed a Savior! She needed a Savior as much as you and I need a Savior, and at the conclusion she sings,

He hath helped his servant, Israel, in remembrance of his mercy. (Luke 1:54)

God saves us by mercy. Mercy means that a holy God's hands are unshackled today because of the fact that in love Christ came and died. And it's "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Mary needed God's mercy as much as you and I need His mercy. She speaks of it here in the Magnificat.

And then Mary's final note:

As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever. (Luke 1:55)

That also is a remarkable statement. Mary refers all the way back, past all of the kings of the Old Testament, back further than David, back beyond Moses, and goes back to the time when God called a man from Ur of the Chaldees, and when He called him He said, "I'll do three things for you Abraham, if you will believe Me. First of all I'm going to give you a land. Second I'm going to bring from you a nation. And the third is, I'm going to make you a blessing to all people." And when this man offered up his boy Isaac, from whom was to come that line, that is, "the seed," God again renewed these promises to him:

And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice. (Genesis 22:18)

And now Mary, there in the hill country of Judah, in the home of Zacharias and Elisabeth, utters this tremendous song, this Magnificat, "My soul doth magnify the Lord!" She is reaching back into the Old Testament and taking the promise that God made to Abraham. She says, "It's now being fulfilled!" What a privilege she had. What a glorious privilege she had. No wonder her soul could magnify the Lord!

The Rebuke of the Manger

And then the day came. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. She gave birth to her first-born Son, wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Men have tried from that day to this to establish certain geographical spots and certain things and make them famous. There are monuments all over this world today that men have erected. But did you know that the most famous monument there ever has been is a little manger? Today some people almost worship that manger, and they put a little doll in it as though that's where Christ is.

Don't misunderstand me, that manger is a wonderful thing, but how it reveals something of Mary! Actually, she didn't put Him in that manger so you and I could use it in our Christmas songs and pageants. Do you know why she put Him in a manger? It was because she was practical. It was a convenient place in that stable. It was a safe place for a newborn, and may I say to you, that manger tells out a story today. God made no mistake in picking that couple. I do not hear Joseph complaining and finding fault and whining. I do not hear Mary criticizing God for not providing a golden cradle for Jesus. I recognize Christ certainly deserved to have had one, but Mary did the best she could, without complaint. That's the message of Christmas.

Oh, we can worship God in church for thirty minutes to an hour and then whine and complain the rest of the week. And there are a lot of folk who do that.

My friend, that little manger rebukes us today, and then it tells out something else. In this affluent society today where we have so many things – I went into a department store this past week, not to buy, but to go with my wife, and I just walked around. Actually, I became overwhelmed with the *things*! I have never seen as many things as they have this year! Never in the history of the world have we had so many things – all in celebration of the little One who came to tell us that *things* really don't amount to anything!

My friend, if things had been necessary, if a palace and amenities befitting a king were essential for character and the development today of human life, then God would have provided them. He omitted them to show that these are not necessary.

Today we have everything. We are still being told by some of our leaders that our educational system is second to none, but you know what we are turning out! My friend, *things* don't count. That's what this little manger is still telling us. She wrapped Him and put Him in that rough manger because it was practical and that's all she had. And that's all the Son of God needed. What a rebuke!

The Worship of Jesus

The angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds on a hillside, but they weren't the first to worship Jesus. It was that woman Elisabeth who was the first one to worship Him before He was born. But these shepherds came down and they worshiped Him. My friend, you cannot worship Him until you know Him as your Savior. Go back to where God broke through for the Christmas story. A priest was serving at an altar of incense. And that altar of incense, along with those three articles of furniture in the holy place, speaks of worship. Zacharias was in there worshipping God and doing it through prayer, praying for a son. But you must remember that the priest had come by the brazen altar, which speaks of the cross of Christ. And there had been blood offered there. My friend, you can't worship Him today until you've been to the cross – not to Bethlehem, but to Golgotha. Not to a manger, but to a cross.

We hear today a great deal about "let's put Christ in Christmas." I hate to say this, but do you think the world outside is going to put Christ in Christmas? Of course not. What we need to put in Christmas is the cross! Oh, my friend, it is the cross that should be in Christmas. The birth and the death of Christ come in one package, all wrapped in swaddling clothes – for when they crucified Him they removed His garments.

I'm not being irreverent when I say, "Mary had a little Lamb." John the Baptist says, "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world." Isaiah said, "He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter." Yonder on the cross is when He looked down at Mary and said, "Woman, behold thy son!" In other words, "The cloud of suspicion and shame that you went under at Nazareth is going to be forever removed. I'll be back from the dead in three days." And He literally is "declared the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4).

The Gift is For You

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way....
(Isaiah 53:6)

If you would ask me what's wrong with the human family, I would point to those three words, "his own way." They describe the trouble today with the world, each one going his own way.

There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. (Proverbs 14:12)

But when you come His way, not to the cradle, but to the cross and accept and receive Christ Jesus as Savior, you receive the gift that came on that first Christmas day, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

*And heaven came down, our souls to greet,
and glory crowns the mercy seat.*

No wonder Mary, this peasant girl out of Nazareth, could say, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior."

These are two remarkable women, Elisabeth and Mary, who simply believed God and worshiped this One,

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and, being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore, God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.
(Philippians 2:6-11)

Oh, that you and I also might *worship* Jesus!