

Christmas: When Your Heart is Full by Dr. Stephen Hatfield

Focal Text: Luke 1:39-56

Background: Hebrews 13:15-16

Main Idea: Being Spirit-filled means that we will have unusual spiritual insight into God's truth and a beautiful fruit of joy within us.

Question to Explore: Do I have the joy of salvation?

Study Aim: To understand that as Spirit-filled Christians, we recognize that true worship is not about us but all about God and His greatness!

Quick Read: Like Elizabeth, when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we will not be focusing on "getting a blessing" but rather on "being a blessing" to others. When our hearts are full, we want to praise and worship Him.

Introduction

My wife and I are the parents of five children. All five have grown up, married, and all have children of their own. Every birthday that rolls around finds Marcie and I remembering when we found out she was "with child." In our generation, you told family and close friends the good news. Then you waited for the months to pass. Finally, there would come the day when you made your way to the hospital and waited. And waited. And waited until a baby was born.

This is not the case today. Sandwiched between the announcement a child would be born and the actual birth and celebration is the "gender reveal." Medical technology makes it possible to know this information months before the birth. There are several ways to celebrate this event. Family and friends gather to see the gender reveal which usually involves the color blue or pink. In case this is new to you, anything blue identifies a boy, and anything pink identifies a girl.

There is a plethora of ways to share this good news. Most involve the above-mentioned colors. Ideas ranging from a pinata that has every piece of candy wrapped in blue or pink to cutting a cake to reveal either blue or pink filling inside are just a few.

Full disclosure here: Marcie and I did this the old-fashioned way. The gender of our children was not known until their birth. Neither mom nor dad knew this information. We did attempt to guess—we figured we had a 50/50 chance of being right.

Our lesson this Christmas season revolves around a miraculous gender reveal of two babies—John the Baptist and Jesus, God's Messiah to all of us. Unbeknownst to a lost and dying world, God was preparing a way for His world to be redeemed. Only a handful of people understood what God was doing with Elizabeth, a woman far beyond child-bearing years. She would bring

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Jesus' forerunner, John, into the world. And few understood or knew God's choice of Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. No one knew that through His power, God Himself would come down to earth fully God and fully man in the birth of the Son of God, Jesus the Christ.

Our Christmas lesson passage, Luke 1:39-56, recounts Mary's journey from Nazareth to a village in the hill country in Judea to visit with Elizabeth. Gabriel's words in 1:36 suggest by implication that Mary should visit Elizabeth. She wasted no time making the 4–5-day journey. Perhaps she suspected Zacharias and Elizabeth knew of the message the angel Gabriel had delivered to Mary. Whatever the case, she arrived, went straight into the house, and recounted her experience to both. God had chosen two very special women to be mothers of two very special boys. One mother-to-be would give birth to the forerunner of God's Anointed One. The other would give birth to God's Anointed One. They had much to talk about. So, two mothers stood facing one another. They were both very ordinary. One was past child-bearing years, while the other was quite young but carrying a child. Don't you think they both needed help and reassurance? Elizabeth needed assurance the child she carried would indeed introduce God's Messiah to the world. And Mary needed assurance that what was happening to her was real and not some dream. Both found what they needed in the company of each other.

Commentary

Elizabeth's Prophecy (Luke 1:39-45)

Warren Wiersbe emphasized "Joy" as the key word in Elizabeth's prophecy.¹

The Joy of Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45)

Elizabeth did not say Mary was blessed *above* women. She said Mary was blessed *among* women. We must not elevate Mary to a place where she is worshipped. At the same time, we do not want to minimize her role in God's plan. To elevate Mary to a divine-like role missed the point, not only of this passage but also of the entire New Testament. Robert J. Dean said it well: "Mary was a recipient of grace, not a source of grace. Her blessedness was the blessedness of one who became a willing channel of divine blessings to others."²

The Joy of the unborn son, John (Luke 1:41, 44)

1:41. This verse presents an interpretive challenge to us: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit."

In some mysterious way, the Holy Spirit produced this miraculous response of the unborn baby, John. Luke had already made mention of the Spirit's power upon John: "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). Wiersbe adds: "Even before his birth, John rejoiced in Jesus Christ, just as he did during his earthly ministry (John 3:29-30)."³

Illustration: Elizabeth and in-utero-baby John have a positive, visceral physical reaction to the sound of Mary's voice. We've all seen the videos of surprise homecomings of family members: our bodies feel and respond to what we deeply love and long for, sometimes "betraying" us in public spaces; like Elizabeth we might uncontrollably respond by crying out in tears and screams and hugs, or even shocking stillness.

But adding another layer to the incident, we are told Elizabeth's response is an expression of the presence of the Holy Spirit who fills her. Elizabeth and baby John receive knowledge from the Lord about what is true but not yet able to be seen or proven, what will only be able to be held onto by faith: the Messiah is here in their home and the Messiah is in young Mary's womb.⁴

Leaping is an expression of joy, celebration as well as struggle. This idea is found in other passages in the Old Testament. "But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall" (Malachi 4:2). In 2 Samuel 6:16, David leaped and danced before the Lord. Genesis 25:22 describes Jacob and Esau struggling together within their mother.

1:45. "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord." In addition to the blessedness of Mary, Elizabeth focused on Mary's commitment to believe in God's plan. In contrast, we see the unbelief of Zacharias when Gabriel revealed to him the promise of a son to be born to him and Elizabeth. Because of his unbelief, John's father was struck dumb until John's birth.

Mary's Song (Luke 1:46-56)

Music is the language of one's spirit. You may not remember all the dialogue in the movie, *The Sound of Music*, but you probably recognize some parts of the song "Climb Every Mountain." Certain songs take me back to particular times in my life. Some songs are happy, and some are sad. Whatever the case, songs are part of who we are.

Illustration: If you're a country music fan, you know Travis Tritt, who has made a name for himself playing everything from Southern rock to bluegrass to standard country music as a performer. In an interview, Travis revealed a little known secret about his early years when he played out-of-the-way joints that sometimes got dangerous. Once, when a bar brawl broke out, Tritt tried something that worked so well it became his standard response when fights started.

Tritt said, "Just when things started getting out of hand, when bikers were reaching for their pool cues and rednecks were heading for the gun rack, I'd start playing 'Silent Night.' It could be the middle of July; I didn't care." Tritt said as he played, grown men would stop everything and calm down. "Sometimes they'd even start crying, standing there watching me sweat and play Christmas carols."⁵

Here we have one of the most well-known songs in Christianity—the Magnificat. Its name comes from its first word in the Latin Bible, "I magnify/glorify/exalt." N. T. Wright describes it

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well: “It’s been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by evening candlelight, and set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Johann Sebastian Bach.”⁶ In a sense, the Magnificat is the Gospel before the Gospel. “A fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, and thirty years before Calvary and Easter.”⁷

This song of praise is one of four hymns preserved in Luke 1-2. (See also 1:68-79; 2:14; and 2:29-32).

Most every verse is an Old Testament quotation such as Mary would have known from her childhood. It has many parallels to Hannah’s song of praise concerning the birth of her son, Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Some have called this passage the Magnificat of the Old Testament due to its similarity with Mary’s song.

Stanza 1: What God did for Mary (Luke 1:46-49)

Luke 1:46 And Mary said:

“My soul exalts the Lord,

Luke 1:47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

Luke 1:48 “For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave;

For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

Luke 1:49 “For the Mighty One has done great things for me;

And holy is His name.

Mary magnified God because He saved her.

Mary magnified God for His choosing her to be the mother of God’s Messiah.

Mary magnified God because she would be part of God’s plan of salvation.

Stanza 2: What God did for us (Luke 1:50-53)

Luke 1:50 “AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION
TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM.

Luke 1:51 “He has done mighty deeds with His arm;

He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.

Luke 1:52 “He has brought down rulers from their thrones,

And has exalted those who were humble.

Luke 1:53 “HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS;

And sent away the rich empty-handed.

Mary magnified God because He saved all who would trust in Him.

Mary magnified God because He helped the helpless.

Mary magnified God because He exalted the humble.

Mary magnified God because He provided food for the hungry.

Stanza 3: What God did for Israel (Luke 1:54-55)

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Luke 1:54 “He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,
Luke 1:55 As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his descendants forever.”

Mary magnified God because He was on Israel’s side.
Mary magnified God because He would remember His mercy and keep His promises.⁸

William Barclay approaches the Magnificat from another angle. He sees the principle of the “great reversal” in each of these three stanzas. As part of His plan, God will reverse many things. For example: He will scatter the proud and their plans (1:51). He will cast down the mighty and exalt the humble (1:52). He will provide good things for the hungry and turn the rich away (1:53).

God’s reversing of social and political rights and rules is a common theme in both the Old and New Testaments. Both Hannah’s and Mary’s songs speak of when God will make all things right. There will be a reversal of fortunes.

Dean asserts the power of this reversal:

Mary’s song celebrated the reversal of positions that would come under God’s new order. God’s merciful help is given not to the proud, mighty, and the rich of this world. Such people generally think they need nothing beyond themselves. People like Mary, however, are the poor and lowly who are open to God’s grace and help. God’s exaltation of Mary from her low estate thus was a sign of what God would do for his oppressed people and for all who are open to his grace.⁹

Both William Barclay and N. T. Wright draw attention to the “paradox of blessedness” in Mary’s life.¹⁰ God chose Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. This caused her to magnify God and to give thanks for His blessing upon her life. God’s blessing was also a sword that would pierce her heart. “It meant that some day she would see her son hanging on a cross.”¹¹

Wright said it well:

Mary will have to learn many other things as well. A sword will pierce her soul, she is told when Jesus is a baby. She will lose him for three days when he’s twelve. She will think he’s gone mad when he’s thirty. She will despair completely for a further three days in Jerusalem . . . All of us who sing her song should remember these things too. But the moment of triumph will return with Easter and Pentecost, and this time it won’t be taken away.¹²

Conclusion

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Christmas is all about giving. We give presents to those we appreciate and love. Even the most secular of celebrations puts some of its focus on giving. Sadly, most believers say Christmas is all about giving, but in practice, they do something else. What can we learn from Mary's visit with Elizabeth that will help us keep our focus on Jesus during this Christmas season?

The conversation between the older woman expecting a child at last after hope had diminished and the younger woman expecting a child much sooner than she expected gives us more than just Elizabeth prophesying and Mary singing. Consider the following:

1. *Do not expect a blessing—be a blessing to others.* Acts 20:35 is true: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”
2. *Look for opportunities to put into practice the principles of the “great reversal.”* The Lord's Prayer says, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). This means we can actively pursue putting others first, feeding the hungry, and honoring the humble. This is what God's kingdom will be like. We have the opportunity to strive for these things to exist in the here and now.
3. *Magnify God in everything you say and do.* Hebrews 13:15-16 says: “Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

Try singing or saying the Magnificat. Let its words cause you to pray and to wonder. Then you will be ready to magnify God in your words and actions. The Magnificat is magnificent. But do not stop there—move forward in obedience.

Illustration: “A hypocritical businessman, whose fortune had been the misfortune of many others, told Mark Twain piously, “Before I die I intend to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I want to climb to the top of Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud.”

“I have a better idea.” suggested Twain. “Why don't you stay right at home in Boston and keep them?”¹³

Wright sums up the primary focus of our Christmas passage:

Underneath it all is a celebration of God. God has taken the initiative—God the Lord, the Saviour, the Powerful One, the Holy One, the Merciful One, the Faithful One. God is the ultimate reason to celebrate.¹⁴

Merry Christmas.

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, “Luke” *The Bible Exposition Commentary Volume 1* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1989), 173.

²Robert J. Dean, “Luke” *The Layman's Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983), 23-24.

³Wiersbe, 173.

⁴Though there is not an abundance of illustrations for this week's passage, this is an excellent one from the *Center for Excellence in Preaching*. <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2021-12-13/luke-139-45-46-55/>

⁵From *Twang! The Ultimate Book of Country Music Quotations*, compiled by Raymond Obstfeld and Sheila Burgener; cited at PreachingToday.com.

⁶N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 2004), 14.

⁷Ibid.

⁸For further discussion based on this outline of Mary's song, see Wiersbe, 173-74.

⁹Dean, 24.

¹⁰Wright, 14 and William Barclay, "The Gospel of Luke" *The Daily Study Bible Series, Revised Ed.* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 14.

¹¹Barclay, 14.

¹²Wright, 14-15.

¹³https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2965.The_Wit_and_Wisdom_of_Mark_Twain

¹⁴Ibid., 16.