

lesson Christmas

When Your Heart Is Full

MAIN IDEA

Being Spirit-filled means 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? Is the Spirit's fruit, particularly joy, manifest in me, in my interaction with others, and in my worship?

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. And like Mary, when our hearts are full, we want to praise and worship Him.



Introduction

The best things in life are not free, they are *filled*. For what is a Twinkie without its *filling*? This Christmas, we want homes *filled* with love and laughter. We expect an \$8 coffee or \$10 movie popcorn *filled* to the brim. *Full* piggy banks and cookie jars are delightful; and for traveling, a *filled* gas tank is ideal. Musicians *fill* rooms with sounds. Event venues prefer *full* houses *filled* with patrons. Even some newborns have a “*full* head of hair.” (Unlike some of their dads and grandfathers...)

Evidently God formed humanity to long for fulfillment; creating people with responsibility, even telling them to “*fill* the earth.” Thus, Satan tempted Adam and Eve, despite their meaningful life, to believe God was withholding from them a *full* measure of wisdom (Genesis 1:26-30; 3:2-17).

More than 500 times, Scripture uses variations of “full” or “fill.” Some uses are pragmatic: “Jesus said..., ‘Fill the jars with water;’ so they filled them...” (John 2:7). But many uses are intangible: God’s glory “filled the temple” (2 Chronicles 7:1); “filled with awe” (Luke 1:65); “filled with grief” (Matthew 17:23); “filled with the Spirit.” Spirit-filled people become wiser (Exodus 35:31), more powerful (Micah 3:8), better communicators and bolder (Acts 2:4; 4:31), praise-filled and thankful (Ephesians 5:18-20), and demonstrative of the Spirit’s fruits (Galatians 5:22-23). In today’s passage, Elizabeth and Mary—both designated as Spirit-filled (Luke 1:41; 1:35)—exemplified unusual insight into God’s truth and the fruit of joy expressed in words of blessing and worship.

Luke 1:39-56

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 favored, 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. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

⁴⁶ And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Hebrews 13:15-16

¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Full of Delight (Luke 1:39-45)

Presumably, Mary was only a few weeks along in her pregnancy when she left Nazareth for "the hill country of Judea"¹ (1:39). Where did she go? Catholic tradition identifies Ein Karem, four miles south of Jerusalem. Other possibilities include Hebron or Juttah, Levitical towns in the Judean hill country (Joshua 21:9-16). Since Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, was a priest, and she was of the Levitical line, any are plausible.

Exactly why Mary took this journey is uncertain; the angel did not tell her to go. Although we traditionally believe Elizabeth was a distant cousin, the Greek word *sungenesis* ("kinswoman," translated "relative") in Luke 1:36 might mean she was an aunt or great-aunt. Perhaps, as family, Mary was excited about Elizabeth's pregnancy and wanted to help prepare, or she thought seeing Elizabeth would further validate the miracle happening in her own body. Moreover, if anyone knew of her pregnancy, Mary might have been escaping disapproving stares and gossiping lips in Nazareth.

Verse 40 mentions Mary “greeted Elizabeth.” Presumably, Mary used the era’s standard greeting: “peace unto you” (Heb. *shalom aleichem*). The other person was expected to respond, “unto you peace” (*aleichem shalom*).² However, Elizabeth did not respond as expected! Instead, prodded by her child and filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth recognized Mary as “blessed among women” and “the mother of my Lord.” She spoke these welcoming and honoring words “in a loud voice,” a term frequently indicating God-inspired words.

So why this response? Elizabeth’s child, six months in utero, was developmentally on track. At this stage, unborn babies can focus on and respond to noises and voices by moving, kicking, jabbing, and rolling.³ When the unborn John heard Mary’s voice, he leaped, not because he recognized *her*, but because he recognized God’s presence *within* her (1:41). In so doing, he announced the Messiah’s arrival to his mother, thereby performing his first act of preparing the way for the Lord (1:17,76)! Thus, the Holy Spirit’s indwelling imparted a supernatural understanding, making John and Elizabeth the first to realize Mary’s child as the Christ.

Elizabeth, in 1:42, acknowledged Mary’s position as “blessed,” not because of anything she had done, but because her Child would be greater than all others. Notice there was no envy or disdain in her words, simply sheer delight. Although Elizabeth recognized God had done a wonder in her, she celebrated when the Holy Spirit informed her what God was doing through Mary (evidence of her righteousness—see 1:6). She then also blessed the Child in Mary’s womb.

Next, Elizabeth asked a rhetorical question with deep theological meaning: *But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?* (1:43). While she was glad Mary was there, the newly conceived **baby** was Elizabeth’s focus. For centuries, the Israelites recounted OT prophecies promising deliverance. Now, Elizabeth was one of few privy to the Deliverer’s arrival. She recognized an exceptional shift in God’s involvement with humanity. Before now, people approached God, but now, God had come to her, and she expressed that reality in first-person: “*my Lord*” (italics mine), acknowledging Mary’s Child as the long-awaited Messiah. Humbled to be included in this moment in history, she was nevertheless astonished by this initial encounter. Yet she willingly submitted herself to this unborn Child, acknowledging Him as her Master, equating Him with God Himself. She then

told Mary what happened (1:44), and in so doing, affirmed the prophecies' realities for both women. Elizabeth blessed Mary for believing the angel's words without needing evidence (1:45; cf. John 20:29). All this overflowed from a full heart in whom the Holy Spirit was allowed to work.

Full of God's Word (Luke 1:46-56)

At this moment in the narrative, those of us who love musicals would like to believe Mary burst into song! But given that does not usually happen in real life, we should probably note 1:46 states Mary "said" the words that followed, as disappointing as that may be.⁴

Notwithstanding, Mary was just as excited as Elizabeth. In 1:47, she said her spirit "rejoices" (Gr. *agalliao*); the word picture here is essentially jumping for joy! Clearly her heart was full. Mary then explained the reason for her joyful praise (1:48): God had been mindful (lit. "looked upon") her humble state (by the world's standards). She further acknowledged her submissive role as servant (lit. "slave"). Yet regardless of such a base condition, she will be called "blessed" by future generations, not because of her piety, but because of the Child within her by whom God will execute His plans for humanity's salvation.⁵ She then contrasted her humility with God's might, and her imperfection with His holiness (1:49).

Mary then moved the focus from herself to Israel at large (1:50). She celebrated God's divine intervention and mercies across time—past, present, and future—toward those who show Him reverence and with whom He desires intimate relationship. In verses 51-53, she contrasted God's works with humanity's acts. God's "arm" symbolizes His power, and He's done "mighty deeds." He has "scattered" the arrogant in judgment. No individual or entity can overpower Him (cf. Philippians 2:9-11). Whereas pride brought sin into the world, humility will provide humanity an escape from it (cf. Philippians 2:5-8). He brings down rulers (Gr. *Dunastas*—rom *dunamai*, "being able or powerful" from which we get "dynasty" and "dynamite") and lifts up the humble.

Mary also proclaimed God has "filled the hungry with good things." God certainly provided literal food for people (e.g. Exodus 16:4,13; 1 Kings 17:4-6), but this also foreshadowed Jesus' work feeding the multitudes (Matthew

14, 15; see also Luke 6:21). However, the word “hunger” (Gr. *peinoao*) can be translated not only as a physical yearning for food, but also a pining for anything one desires strongly. Mary celebrated that God gives good things to those who hunger (for any beneficence), but “has sent the rich away empty” (Gr. *Kenous*—vacuous; foolish; without purpose or result). This is not so the inferior can gain what the superior once had. Nor does it necessarily mean the rich will go away empty-handed, although some translations state it as such. People can still be financially well-off and walk away from Jesus empty and sad as the man did in Matthew 19:16-24. All these dichotomies foreshadow Christ’s work. He will present a change to the very foundations of social order as fallen humanity has defined it (see Luke 4:17-21; 5:31; 14:11; 19:10).

Mary concluded with an all-encompassing description of God’s watch-care over Israel (1:54-55). He has never forgotten His covenant with Abraham, and His mercy is available in every generation to all who believe. Jesus’ coming therefore continues God’s merciful salvific work! Mary’s song is evidence she believed, by faith, God is good and powerful.

Just as many great hymns and modern praise songs come from Scripture, Mary’s text came from OT passages (see sidebar) and followed the pattern of several Psalms: beginning with praises, then identifying reasons for the praise, particularly noting God’s involvement in the world by using active verbs.⁶

The song is further marked by literary elements including repetitive, synonymous, and antonymous descriptors, as well as parallelism. For example, she reiterated God’s mercy, and contrasted the “humble” with the “proud,” and “filled” in opposition to “empty.” As for parallels, roughly each pair of verses have similar phrasings. She also employed personal and corporate parallelism. The “servant” in 1:48 is Mary, but in 1:54, it is Israel. In 1:49, God had done great things for her, but in 1:50-55, Mary described God’s works for her people. God was called “Mighty One” for her in 1:49; in 1:51, He had performed “mighty deeds” for all Israel.

Luke ended this vignette describing a practical detail; Mary stayed about three months (1:56). Obviously, this put Elizabeth’s due date very near Mary’s departure. Although Mary is not mentioned in the verses that follow as being present for John the Baptist’s birth, there is no reason to believe she

left before celebrating with the new mother and father (see 1:58). Luke was not a Western writer who always thought in linear terms; his narratives were less focused on timing, and more driven by content arranged in individual vignettes.⁷ To when Mary returned was also not specifically described. Presumably, she returned to her father's house, since in Luke 2 she and Joseph were still only betrothed when they headed to Bethlehem for the census.

Mary's Christmas Compilation Album

Indicative of a rich and full knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, Mary employed phrases from every section of the OT: Torah, Major/Minor Prophets, and History/Poetry/Writings.⁸ Following are various passages, which perhaps she drew upon, with some parallels of similarities and opposites underlined and bolded. Can you find others?

^{46b} "My soul glorifies the Lord (Psalm 34:2-3).⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior (Psalm 24:5; 25:5; 35:9; Micah 7:7; Isaiah 12:2). ⁴⁸ for he has been mind-ful of the **humble** state of his **servant** (Genesis 29:32; 1 Samuel 1:11). From now on all generations will call me blessed (Psalm 72:17; Proverbs 31:28; Song of Solomon 6:9, Malachi 3:12). ⁴⁹ for the **Mighty One** has done **great things** for me (Deuteronomy 10:21; 11:7; Judges 2:7; Psalm 24:8)—**holy** is his name (Psalm 111:9; Isaiah 5). ⁵⁰ His **mercy** extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation (Psalm 78:8; 103): ⁵¹ He has performed **mighty deeds** with his arm (Exodus 6:6; Psalm 89:10; 98:1; Isaiah 40:10; 51:9; 53:1); he has scattered those who are **proud** in their inmost thoughts (Job 12:3; 17:4; Isaiah 2:12; 13:11). ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones (1 Samuel 2:7; Job 12:17-21; Psalm 72:11-12) but has lifted up the **humble** (1 Samuel 2:7; Job 5:11; Psalm 147:6). ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with **good things** (1 Samuel 2:5; Psalm 107:9) but has sent the rich away **empty** (Job 15:2). ⁵⁴ He has helped his **servant** Israel (Isaiah 41:8-9; 44:1; 45:4), remembering to be **merciful** (Psalm 98:3). ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever (Genesis 17:7-9; 18:18; 22:17), just as he promised our ancestors (Micah 7:20).

Full of Purpose (Hebrews 13:15-16)

Taking today's focal passage in context with the whole of Scripture draws us to two significant verses in Hebrews 13:15-16, where the author gave believers instructions, which parallel these women's words of blessing and worship.

Christ-followers must "continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise" (13:15). OT priests perpetually offered sacrifices for worshipers at the Temple; Christ is our Mediator for offering sacrifices of praise. This "sacrifice" (Gr. *thusia*) comes from a root word meaning "slay" (cf. Romans 12:1; Philippians 4:18; Psalm 50:14, 23; 107:22). Thus, offering worship is not necessarily easy, particularly when circumstances are difficult or uncertain, but it is possible. Mary's situation as the Messiah's mother was uncertain at best, yet she still found reasons for praise.

God is glorified with our praise sacrifices, but He is also honored by our interaction with others. Verse 16 instructs Christ-followers to "do good" (exhibit kind deeds) and "to share" (Gr. *koinonias*: in communion, providing for others' needs—material, emotional, or spiritual—with kindness and generosity).⁹ Notice our provision may not be from excess; this, too, may require sacrifice. For example, God is pleased when I scale back my Christmas gift-giving so I can give more to mission causes; when, though frustrated, I show grace to a disruptive child; when I set aside my agenda to babysit for a single mom who needs a break; when I speak blessing to someone who's wronged me. And God does not merely shrug His shoulders with complacent approval; His pleasure (Gr. *euaresteo*) described in 13:16 means gratified entirely.

In Isaiah 56:1-7, God promises joy for those who obey and honor Him and treat others well. That includes us! When we fulfill these two purposes of worship and service, we will find the fulfillment God created us to desire.

Implications and Actions

Full of Joyful Praise

This season, retailers have challenged us to *fill* our loved ones' stockings with the latest "must-haves." But what if we chose, instead, like Elizabeth, to focus on *filling* our loved ones with words of blessing? Very few of us need more

“stuff,” but we all need to know we are valued. What if we skip some meals and *fill* the local food pantry? What if we sacrifice for others knowing there’s joy set before us, too (see Hebrews 12:2)?

We sing “Joy to the World, the Lord is come,” but do our words, actions, and facial expressions convey the fruit of joy is manifest in us? Or do our lives actually proclaim, “Joy to the World, (*favorite store or website*) is come?” Are we focused on Christmas preparations, instead of preparing for Christmas? Recognizing and celebrating who God is and what He has done are the foundations for authentic worship. Sometimes, it is an infinite sacrifice to worship at Christmastime, particularly when our hearts are heavy, or we are grieving losses. But, like Mary, our hearts *can* overflow with worship even when we do not understand every aspect about God’s work, because we believe, by faith, He is good and powerful.

Questions

1. Whom can you bless today with words of acceptance and love? Can you give tangible gifts more circumspectly as a result of today’s lesson? Will you give joy to those around you, instead of complaints (see Romans 8:28 and Philippians 4:11)?
2. Is joy truly manifest in you? Can you compose your own “song” using Scriptures that are meaningful to you to joyfully celebrate God’s work in your life?

3. What is the difference between making “Christmas preparations” and “preparing for Christmas?” Give examples of each from your own life and experience.

4. How can you worship God more joyfully this Christmas? How will you prepare for and live differently next Christmas based on what you have learned this year?

5. Read Romans 12 in light of Hebrews 13:16. Which of the attributes and actions listed need more practice in your life? What practical actions can you take to sacrifice for God’s pleasure both in worship and in fellowship with other believers?

6. On a video or audio search engine such as Youtube or Google, search for “Magnificat,” “*Magnificat anima mea dominum*,”¹⁰ and/or “Mary’s Song” to hear various interpretations of Mary’s words of praise. Or, better yet, find or compose a simple version for your study group to learn and sing together!

Endnotes

- ¹ Mary almost certainly traveled in a caravan because the week-long journey was at least 100 miles, uphill all the way from Nazareth, with the risk of bandits who frequently hid in the hills. A treacherous journey, to say the least. Hopefully, she wasn't yet dealing with morning sickness!
- ² The Talmud instructs the Jewish faithful to greet one another with blessings of peace, believing it to be "one of the greatest gifts one can give and receive," and that speaking peace brings it into the physical world. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1582771/jewish/The-Jewish-Hello.htm. Accessed 6/17/2022.
- ³ <https://www.healthline.com/health/pregnancy/6-months-pregnant#fetal-development>. Accessed 6/17/2022. <https://www.pampers.com/en-us/pregnancy/pregnancy-calendar/6-months-pregnant>. Accessed 6/17/2022.
- ⁴ However, Mary's song, as well as Zechariah's in 1:68-79 and Simeon's in Luke 2:29-32, *did* become hymns for the early church and were and are still commemorated in musical arrangements for the church.
- ⁵ cf. Genesis 30:13—Leah received a child from God's goodness toward her, not because of her goodness.
- ⁶ e.g. Psalms 8, 33, 47, 100, 135, 136.
- ⁷ Also note the similarities in wording between 1:57 and 2:6-7. Luke speaks in generalities about the actual births of both John and Jesus. We don't know what assistance Mary had with Jesus' birth, either.
- ⁸ Because her song stylistically and thematically mirrors much of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, it's possible Mary modeled her song after Hannah's. See <https://www.faithgateway.com/cultural-backgrounds-study-bible-marys-song-of-jesus-coming-birth/#.YsMGJuzMI-R> for a comparison of the two.
- ⁹ cf. 2 Corinthians 9:13. Among others, similarly rooted words are also translated as "fellowship" (Acts 2:42; Galatians 2:9), "contribution" (Romans 15:26), or "participation" (1 Corinthians 10:16; Philippians 3:10).
- ¹⁰ Her song is traditionally known as the Magnificat, which comes from the opening word in the Latin Vulgate's translation—"*Magnificat anima mea dominum*"—*My soul magnifies (i.e. glorifies) the Lord*.

Prayer for this Study

Jesus Restores Me

“When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (John 19:26-27, NIV).

Father,

I enter Your throne room bowing my heart before You, singing praises to You, the God of my salvation. My heart is overwhelmed with gratitude when I consider how the world was in desperate need of a Savior, and in Your great mercy and love You sent Your only Son Jesus, as a ransom to forgive us of our sins, restoring our relationship with You, a Holy and Just God.

My heart is humbled Lord, when I contemplate what Jesus endured by going to the cross because of His amazing and relentless love for me. My soul is grieved and silenced when I read in Your Holy Word how Jesus willingly suffered beatings, scourging, vile hatred, and humiliation at the hands of evil men, and was finally led to Golgotha in agony as He faced the gruesome act of crucifixion, taking my place, wearing my crown of thorns, bearing my shame and sin, to forgive me and redeem me. I am grateful Jesus faithfully and steadfastly remained on the cross in obedience to You, Oh God, even though His revilers challenged Him to come down and display His power, just as in the wilderness, Satan had tempted Him to wear His crown of glory without going to the cross. My heart is overcome with thankfulness at how Jesus faithfully hung on the cross, facing Your full wrath as He took on the sin of the world, experiencing the excruciating pain of separation from You, His loving Father, until He cried out, “It is finished.”

Lord, I read in Your Holy Word how Jesus’ lifeless body lay in a sealed tomb guarded by soldiers. I am sure His disciples and followers felt defeated and thought the situation was hopeless. I am eternally thankful this

was not the end of the story. By Your mighty power, You raised Jesus from death to life. Jesus conquered and won the victory over sin and the grave, and Satan was defeated. Lord, with a powerful earthquake, You sent an Angel to roll away the stone and break the seal, revealing an empty tomb that is still empty today. "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay" (Matthew 28:6, NIV).

Lord, I am sure Jesus was saddened by the betrayal and abandonment of His closest friends whom He loved dearly. Peter wept bitterly over his sin of denial, seeking forgiveness, and John, who I am sure felt sorrow over deserting Jesus, made his way to the cross to be near Him. My heart is comforted in knowing how Jesus, even while hanging on the cross, tenderly restored and forgave John by giving John the responsibility of caring for His mother, and after His resurrection also restored Peter and the other disciples appearing to them many times. Lord, when my fearful or prideful heart causes me to stumble and fall, I am very thankful that because of Jesus' atoning work on the cross, You are waiting for me with open arms to come back to You in surrendered humility, as You forgive me and welcome me back into fellowship with You. Help me to be diligent, be on the lookout, and pray continually as You give me strength to remain faithful in the face of temptations and trials. Thank You that I can trust You will transform for good what Satan plans for evil in my life.

The cross was terrible, but it is a beautiful reminder of Jesus' sacrificial love for me. Thank You that You never leave me or forsake me, even through my failures and weaknesses, but You beckon me to come to You as You forgive me, restore me, transform me, and teach me, helping me become bold through the power of the Holy Spirit living in me. Remind me, Oh God, that I am not alone, and when I am weak, You are strong, and You faithfully love me and guide me in Your paths of righteousness.

In the strong name of Jesus,

Amen

DLB