



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

## Grow, Pray Study for the Week of December 10, 2023

### Weekly Prayer:

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth, thou art, dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart. Amen.

### Monday, December 11

#### Scripture: Luke 1:46-50

Mary said,

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored  
because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone,  
from one generation to the next,  
who honors him as God.

**Observation:** Last week, we read Elizabeth's greeting when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came to visit her (Luke 1:39- 45). In Mary and Elizabeth's culture, women were second-class citizens. But Mary responded to Elizabeth with a poetic expression of praise that said God had "looked with favor on the low status of his servant." They were both living examples of that. God valued who they really were, no matter what their status in human society!

**Application:** Elizabeth and Mary rejoiced that God had blessed them. But that did not mean what we often think. It was a blessing of purpose, of participation in what God was doing in the world. Her blessing brought hardship, confusion, and grief, but it was still a blessing. Have you ever received a blessing that included hardship, confusion, or grief? Are you willing to receive that kind of blessing?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, when I ask you to bless me or those I love, I realize that I usually want you to make our immediate lives easier. Teach me how to keep my mind and heart open to your more challenging blessings. Amen.

## Tuesday, December 12

### Scripture: Luke 1:51-56

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,  
remembering his mercy,

just as he promised to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.

**Observation:** The second part of Mary's song showed that the effects of John's and Jesus' births went far beyond a couple of happy rural families. Many of us fail to realize how subversive, even revolutionary, Mary's song really was. Mary's words should make us uncomfortable. They point to a concern God has for the poor, and a sense that the rich have received theirs already. We have the obligation and calling to be used by God to 'fill the hungry with good things.

**Application:** In what ways are you rich or powerful? In what ways "lowly" or "hungry"? Are you willing to seek and accept help in any areas where your life may be "lowly"? Do any parts of Mary's song make you uncomfortable enough to actively use the ways you are rich and/or powerful to lift the burdens of those who are lowly and hungry, and not just to further enhance your own wealth and power?

**Prayer:** Lord God, I don't want you to have to pull me down or send me away empty-handed. Give me the wisdom to share what I have, not to hoard it just for myself. Amen.

## Wednesday, December 13

### Scripture: Luke 1:57-64

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John."

They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him.

After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.

**Observation:** Remember that Zechariah couldn't speak because he had seriously doubted the angel's word that he and Elizabeth would have a son (Luke 1:5-20). However understandable we may find his skepticism, what God's messenger told him all came true. When Zechariah wrote that they would name the baby John, as the angel instructed, he was able to speak again.

**Application:** Zechariah obeyed God and gave up the highly prized privilege (see verse 61) of naming his son after himself. John's call was not to follow his father as a priest but to challenge those religious leaders. When grown, John's ministry pointed to someone greater, not to his own virtues or strengths. How did his father's surrender to God point the way for John's life mission? What inner qualities did Zechariah and John need to live out God's call without resentment or bitterness? How can you nurture those qualities in your life?

**Prayer:** King Jesus, Zechariah, and his son John focused on bringing praise and glory to you, not themselves. Keep developing the same spirit in me. Amen.

#### **Thursday, December 14**

##### **Scripture: Luke 1:65-66**

All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, "What then will this child be?" Indeed, the Lord's power was with him.

**Observation:** Luke said, "everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened." Today we might say there was "a lot of buzz" about John's birth. The aged priest struck dumb after offering incense at the Temple, the visibly pregnant woman all the neighbors knew couldn't have children—in a relatively small town, those things would attract a lot of attention. Then the baby was born, and as soon as the father and mother agreed on a surprising name, Zechariah could speak again! Of course, people talked.

**Application:** Those who hear are interested but still have questions about what it means. This is a pattern in Luke (Luke 3:15, 4:22, 5:26), who distinguishes being amazed from having faith. Faith is about "what it means," not just about whether something or someone is amazing. What helped you move from "Jesus is amazing" to having faith in what Jesus' life, death and resurrection mean for your life and the life of the world you live in?

**Prayer:** Lord God, thank you for sending John to prepare the way for Jesus. This Advent, help me to recognize ways I, too, can draw others to know and worship Jesus. Amen.

## Friday, December 15

### Scripture: Luke 1:67-75

John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,  
"Bless the Lord God of Israel  
because he has come to help and has delivered his people.  
He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house,  
just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.  
He has brought salvation from our enemies  
and from the power of all those who hate us.  
He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and remembered his holy covenant,  
the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.  
He has granted that we would be rescued  
from the power of our enemies  
so that we could serve him without fear,  
in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes,  
for as long as we live.

**Observation:** When we read Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), we noted that her song was not about her personal hopes or wishes, but about what God was doing through the child she would bear. When John the Baptist was born, his father Zechariah's praise was similar. He began by praising not his own son, but the child Mary would bear. He declared that God "has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house.... He has brought salvation...he has shown mercy."

**Application:** Like all Jews in that day, Zechariah lived under Roman occupation. In verse 71 he said God "has brought salvation from our enemies." But scholar N. T. Wright noted that there was more than that in his words: "Zechariah's vision goes beyond simply a realigning of political powers. God's mercy, the forgiveness of sins, the rescue from death itself; all of this points to a deeper and wider meaning of 'salvation'." How did John and Jesus deliver all humans from "our enemies" in ways a merely political revolution could not?

**Prayer:** God of peace, there is so much awful stuff in our world that deeply troubles my heart. Let my peace and trust in your promises energize me to do my part in your work of setting this broken world to rights. Amen.

## Saturday, December 18

### Scripture: Luke 1:76-80

You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.  
You will tell his people how to be saved  
through the forgiveness of their sins.

Because of our God's deep compassion,  
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,  
to give light to those who are sitting in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide us on the path of peace."

The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

**Observation:** Images of light and darkness occur over and over in the Advent songs and stories. Zechariah's words reflected not just fatherly pride, but divine insight. The angel Gabriel had said John would "turn many people in Israel back to their God...herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah ...kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics...get the people ready for God" (Luke 1:17, *The Message*). When John was born, Zechariah said that he would share the good news that "The dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness."

**Application:** We read earlier this week that when people in the Judean hill country heard of the events around John's birth, they asked, "What will this child turn out to be?" His father Zechariah had a strong sense of his son's mission, as verse 76 showed. Who played John's role in your life—who prepared the way for your faith, and introduced you to Jesus? In what ways has Jesus dispelled darkness by bringing light into your life? Are you willing to trust Jesus to touch wounded parts of your life that still need the healing that comes as "the dawn from heaven" keeps breaking into our hurting hearts?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you were, and are, the dawn from heaven, the light in the darkness that my life needs. Open my eyes to take in and rejoice in the continual dawning of your light. Amen.