

A Joy-filled Confirmation

He Has Done Great Things / Luke 1:39-45 / Sunday, December 17, 2023

Introduction:

As we continue in our Advent series titled, “He Has Done Great Things,” today, we will look at our final story in this series from Luke’s Gospel over the next two weeks together. Like the story of Gabriel’s announcement of the child to be born to Mary, this one also holds a miraculous and significant proclamation followed by Mary’s response to it. We will consider the proclamation this week and her response to it next week, a response that holds the moment this series is focused on, where Mary praises God for the great things He has done. Before we get to our passage, let me give a brief overview of what Luke writes up to this point in his gospel to see how our story connects. In Luke 1:5-25, Luke reveals how the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and promised the miraculous conception and birth of a child to his wife Elizabeth, who would be named John. Gabriel tells Zechariah that John would be great before the Lord and the one to prepare the way of the Lord before He comes. This was a significant promise of an important child to be born. Following this, in Luke 1:26-38, the angel Gabriel appears to a virgin named Mary. Gabriel likewise promised that she would conceive and bear a child, who would be called Jesus. The angel tells Mary that Jesus would be great and called the Son of the Most High. He also says this child would be the promised Messiah King to rule forever in a kingdom with no end. This was an even more significant promise of an even more important child to be born. When Mary believes this would happen soon but wonders how it would be possible because she was a virgin, Gabriel tells her it would come through the divine activity of God’s Spirit for divine purposes, and shares Elizabeth’s miraculous conception as a sign that nothing will be impossible with God. Luke intentionally weaves the stories of Mary and Elizabeth’s promised children to point us to the significance of their births in the plans and purposes of God. Our story today continues to draw out that significance. Notice first how Luke sets the stage in verses 39-40, “In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” Luke begins by saying “In those days,” linking our story with what just took place. Immediately following Gabriel’s visit to Mary, Mary “arose and went with haste” to see Elizabeth, probably longing to see the fulfillment of Gabriel’s words. As she arrives to a town in Judah, she goes straight into the house of Zechariah and greets Elizabeth. This greeting sets up an anticipated interaction with these two women of promise and while we might expect the story to focus on them sharing the Lord’s work in their lives and the promises made to them, we discover something else takes place. The Spirit of God takes over this conversation, and Luke draws our attention to two things taking place through the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. First, in verses 41-44, we see,

The Spirit’s Confirmation of the Importance of Mary’s Baby

After giving no details of what Mary said in her greeting to Elizabeth, the narrative takes a dramatic turn focusing on what is happening in Elizabeth before we hear her say anything to Mary. Look at what happens in verse 41, “And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.” Pause there. The first thing we see is the baby in Elizabeth’s womb “leaped” at the sound of Mary’s greeting. The word for leaped carries the idea of sheep and other animals skipping and prancing around. This is a spontaneous joyful act taking place in Elizabeth’s womb, and we should be careful not to write this off as though the baby is just kicking or squirming randomly. Notice how Elizabeth repeats what happened in her womb as the reason for her pronouncements to Mary in verse 44, “For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” Elizabeth recognizes the act of her unborn child as a unique experience and describes it as a conscious emotional reaction to the sound of Mary’s greeting, saying “the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” And, as we will see, this is a reason for Elizabeth’s recognition of the blessed state of Mary. Now, we haven’t looked at Gabriel’s announcement of John’s birth in this series but there is something important we should know from that story at this point in the narrative.

Look at verses Luke 1:13-17. Gabriel tells Zechariah, "... your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and... he will be great before the Lord... and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will... make ready for the Lord a people prepared." Do you see what Gabriel told Zechariah? Elizabeth's baby would be filled with the Holy Spirit, in His mother's womb, and he would prepare people for the Lord to come. Church, this joyful leaping was no accident. It was divinely caused by the Holy Spirit to have John prepare the way of the Lord, even from the womb. Let's pause to consider an important implication from this moment in our passage. Consider what this reveals us about an unborn child in the womb. It reveals that a child in the womb is full of life. Life that is aware of its surroundings, life that experiences emotional responses to things, and life that the Spirit of God can dwell within. Church don't let the world deceive you, life doesn't wait to begin at birth, life has already begun in the womb. And what we see take place in this moment is Elizabeth's unborn baby is bearing witness to joy coming from the life and purpose of Mary's baby. This becomes even more clear as we continue in our story. Pick back up in verse 41, "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.'" Not only is the baby in her womb filled with the Holy Spirit, but Elizabeth herself was as well. Luke describes the result of this filling by saying she "exclaimed with a loud cry." In the original language, the idea is that Elizabeth was unrestrained in an outburst of joyful praise. Think with me for a moment about Elizabeth's life to this point. In Luke 1:24-25 we are told that Elizabeth had "kept herself hidden" and thanked God that her reproach would be taken away from her. Ponder that reversal for her, as she would go from the disgrace of being called barren to the joy of having a child. That would certainly cause her to be unrestrained in praise of God, right? But that is not what causes this praise. Notice the Elizabeth's unrestrained joy is not in what God had done for her, but what God had done for Mary. She speaks of Mary and her child being in a state of blessedness, both being favored and honored. Verse 42 is exalted prose composed in a particular way to highlight the second half of the blessing as more important than the first. The blessed state of Mary is subordinate to the blessed state of the child, showing the focus is on the child in her womb. Mary is blessed because of the baby she was carrying. Elizabeth's question continues this focus in verse 42, where she says, "why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Think of what this is saying. The unborn child in Mary's womb was Elizabeth's Lord. Lord is a significant title in this gospel and Luke uses it interchangeably throughout to speak of both Jesus Christ and God the Father. It is the same term that we saw Gabriel use in Luke 1:16-17 when referring to God, and the same term we will see Elizabeth use for God as well in verse 45. Church, this is what the unborn baby in Elizabeth's womb was leaping over, and it is what the Spirit is bearing witness to in this moment. The baby in Mary's womb was the Lord. Certainly, Mary was greatly blessed, Gabriel pronounced her to be favored by God. However, that blessing wasn't because of anything in Mary but had everything to do with the nature and greatness of the child in her womb. She was blessed because of the unmerited grace of God in being chosen to carry the child who would be the Lord incarnate come to save his people. Mary will confirm her own understanding of this in her response, which we will look at next week. For now, think on the Spirit's confirmation of the importance of Mary's baby. He is Jesus, our Lord. We have seen so many confirmations over the past few weeks of the divine nature of this child born over two thousand years ago, and this is another one. Following this, we see another important thing take place through the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in verse 45, as we see,

The Spirit's Affirmation of the Blessings of Belief

A common style of Luke's writing is to link things that confirm the person and purpose of Jesus Christ with the response of individuals to those things. Note the concluding statement by Elizabeth in verse 45, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

The outburst by Elizabeth, through the Spirit, was not only intended to confirm the glory of the baby in Mary's womb but also to affirm the happiness and joy Mary would have in believing the Lord would fulfill his promises to her. Belief, or faith in the promised salvation of God, through Jesus, is one of the main threads that moves through Luke's Gospel. He constantly points us to positive examples of faith and negative examples of a lack of faith, encouraging us to consider our own response to the truth of the gospel. Often, linked to the positive examples we find the benefits that come from faith. Here we see Elizabeth proclaim that Mary is "blessed." Luke changes terms for "blessed" here, using a robust word that carries the idea of being fully satisfied and happy. Luke doesn't appear to be communicating a different kind of blessing from verse 42 but expounding on it. Mary's state of blessedness is one that leads to full satisfaction and happiness that comes from her belief that God would fulfill His promises to her. She would be happy and fully satisfied because she believed. Next week, we will see Mary burst out in the song of joy-filled praise that we have been moving toward in our series. In that song, she will speak of her blessed state but most of her song is will speak of the great things God has done for others. Mary understood that the baby in her womb would not only mean great blessings for her, but also great blessing for all who place their trust in Him. Because that baby would be the Son of the Most High God and the promised Messiah to reign forever, but His work of salvation would be greater than anyone could have imagine, because He didn't come simply to free Israel from the oppression of Rome but to free all His people from the greater oppression of their nature of sin. His life, death, and resurrection would save His people from the just wrath of God for sin and reconciled them to their God, leading to an outpouring of God's favor and kindness on them forever and the eternal joy in the presence of His glory. Church, Luke's focus on the Spirit's affirmation of Mary's blessings in belief points to how we too will be blessed as we believe. As I have thought of what this passage might be calling us to believe, desire, or do, I thought of a few questions for us to consider as we seek to apply it to our lives. First,

1) Do You Believe in the Fulfillment of God's Promises?

The conclusion of our passage naturally leads us to consider if we believe in the fulfillment of God's promises. The first promise we all must believe is the promise of salvation available in Jesus Christ. The book of Romans lays out the good news of this salvation, showing us that though all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, God has made a way for people to be justified before Him through faith in Jesus Christ. Romans 10:9-10 says "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." This means you confess that Jesus is the Lord who died for your sin and believe that God raised Him from the dead to show that His death was sufficient to cover the payment for your sin. After saying this, we find this beautiful promise in Romans 10:13, that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Everyone who hears the truth of the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection for our sin and calls on the name of Jesus for forgiveness of their sin will be saved. We must believe in that promise, and the amazing reality is that when we do, the promises of God are opened to us because, as 2 Corinthians 1:20 tells us, "all the promises of God find their yes in Christ." This means promises like Jesus' promise to always be with us to the end of the age from Matthew 28:20 will be true for you. God's promise in Isaiah 41:10 to strengthen, help, and uphold you will be true for you. His promises to never leave you or forsake you in Hebrews 13:5, to be an ever present help in your time of trouble in Psalm 46:1, to comfort you as you mourn in Matthew 5:4, and to wipe away every tear from your eyes in Revelation 21:4 will all be true for you in Jesus Christ. Church, do you believe in the fulfillment of God's promises? If so, you too will be blessed. If not, search for God's promises in His Word and ask for the Spirit to help you believe in the fulfillment of them. Second,

2) Do You Find Joy in the Glory of Jesus Christ?

As we see the unborn baby leap for joy, Elizabeth burst out in joy-filled praise, and anticipate Mary's joy in her response, we find that joy is an inevitable mark of the Spirit's presence in our lives. In Luke 6:20-23, Luke uses the same idea of leaping for joy in connection to the word blessed, coming from the mouth of Jesus to his disciples, where he says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets." This shows us that even if we are poor, hungry, or weep, we can and will find great blessing and joy in the glory of Christ. Even if we are hated, excluded, reviled, or spurned, we can and will find great blessing and joy in the glory of Christ. This is because our joy isn't anchored to our shifting circumstances but to our faithful and steady Savior. Do you find joy in the glory of Christ? If so, rejoice in the God of your salvation. If not, let this passage encourage your heart to cling to Christ for your joy. Finally,

3) Do You Bear Witness to the Glory of Our Lord?

In our story, two people are filled with the Holy Spirit. John is filled with the Spirit in Elizabeth's womb, and Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit at Mary's greeting. As they are filled with the Spirit, they both bear witness to the glory of Jesus Christ. John leaps for joy from within Elizabeth's womb at the presence of Christ and Elizabeth proclaims Jesus as her Lord. The essential work of the Holy Spirit is to bring glory and honor to Jesus Christ. Before Jesus ascends into heaven at His resurrection, He tells His disciples in Acts 1:8, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The Spirit's filling leads to witness. Is your life bearing witness to the glory of Christ? Does how you prioritize your time show the importance of Christ in your life? Does your joyful worship point those around you to the glory of Christ? Do you seek to find ways to share the gospel with others and witness to the great things He has done in your life? If so, continue to desire more and more to come to know the glory of our Savior. If not, think on the purpose of the Spirit's presence in your life and ask God to help you bear witness to Christ's glory through your life.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of extended response, reflect on these questions and ask the Spirit to work on your heart. God has done great things for us, and he calls each of us to respond to those things. You are welcome to sit and reflect as long as you need and stand to sing when you are led to do so. You are also invited to come and kneel before the Lord as you respond to His grace today. You can also come and receive prayer from a member of our prayer team who you will find worshipping on the front rows or at the bottom of the stairs in the back. Church, there is never a Sunday that goes by without the Lord calling of us to go deeper into His grace as we hear the truth of His Word. Press into His grace this morning and see how He can and will satisfy your heart. Pray with me as we respond together.