

God Breaks His Silence

What to do when God speaks.

Lesson 3: When God Speaks, We Should Worship (Luke 1:39-56)

There is no jump in the narrative – no days after or months following. The next part of the story occurs immediately after the last. Mary was tending to her normal teenage domestic duties when Gabriel appears to her. She is perplexed at his strange greeting. He calls her favored of the Lord.

He explains to her that she is favored because God has chosen her to carry His Son and her Savior. He will be called Jesus (1:31). Mary believed but didn't quite understand how it would happen, since she was still a virgin. The angel explained that the "Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." And, to help this settle in her young mind, he tells her that her "relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren." Thus, "nothing will be impossible with God" (1:35-37).

The angel departed from Mary and Mary departed for Judea. Luke says "in those days Mary arose and went with haste to the hill country, to a town in Judah" (1:39). The story just keeps going. After her encounter with Gabriel, Mary left to Judah, the hill parts of Judea where Elizabeth lived and the continues.

Read Luke 1:39-56. Discuss your initial thoughts.

A Common Ground

Mary and Elizabeth were two very common women. There is nothing about them that is really particular - at least not until now. After their encounter with Gabriel, their lives suddenly changed from common to uncommon. They received a specific word from God that separated them from all others on the planet.

It was a hard thing to believe, but they both knew that God was able to do it. With God, all things are possible. Still, Mary rushed over to Elizabeth's house for some reason. Some have said that she wanted to hide her pregnancy from Joseph, but why go all the way to Elizabeth's house and why so soon? Others have said that she wanted to go congratulate Elizabeth, but that too is far-fetched especially when you see Mary's first words to her (1:46).

A better answer might be that she needed to be with someone who had some common ground with her. There was only one who did and she was a cousin. Still, this begs to question for what purpose and why so soon? By digging deeper into their commonality, we could find some more specific responses to this question.

1. Reflect back to our last lesson when the angel tells her, “behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren” (1:36). How does this lend to our question and what does it suggest?
2. Notice that the angel emphasizes “old age” and “barren.” What do you think the angel is communicating?
3. Why do you think that Gabriel mentions that Elizabeth was already in her sixth month?

John Calvin commented that Mary left with haste “partly to increase and strengthen her faith, and partly to celebrate the grace of God which both had received.” Mary believed God’s word. She didn’t need to confirm her faith by some sort of miracle. She was satisfied with God’s word. She only wanted to strengthen her faith and celebrate God’s grace. Besides, the offer was put out there by the angel anyways. She didn’t want to deny it.

An Uncommon Experience

When Mary arrived at the home of Zachariah, she went inside and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard the greeting, her “baby leaped in her womb” (1:41). This is not a kind of startling that sometimes occurs with babies in the womb when their mothers jump. Rather this appears to be a reaction to a divine intervention.

Notice that the leaping of the baby boy was simultaneous with Elizabeth being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” The reaction of John was a burst of emotion. Gabriel said that John was to be the forerunner of Jesus – the herald of the Christ. It would be John who would point out the Savior. And, his ministry didn’t begin too soon (see 1:15). Baby John heralded the Christ while still in his mother’s womb!

Elizabeth followed his cue with a prophetic word. She, being full of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed:

“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. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” (1:42-45)

Throughout the New Testament we find a strong connection between prophecy and being filled with the Holy Spirit. The two seem to go hand-in-hand. While it occurred more than often after Jesus sent the Comforter, it was not at all common in the days before. Prophecy was not like what it is today. The Bible was not written, so God was communicating by using ordinary people. Elizabeth didn’t know by her own initiative that Mary was the mother of Jesus. The Spirit of God taught her.

4. Why do you think that God filled Mary and John with the Holy Spirit?
5. How would you describe the prophetic word that Elizabeth uttered? And, how would you describe what she might have felt at that moment (as well as Mary)?
6. The prophetic word pronounces blessings in many ways. See if you can find them and as you do, ask yourself what it could be teaching you?

God set all of this up - from the appearing of the angel to the meeting of these two mothers. God filled baby John with the Spirit (1:15) so that he would announce the Lord's Son (1:17). He couldn't speak out loud, but he found a way to make Him known. Elizabeth was humbled to have such a privileged experience - to meet the mother of Jesus. Being filled with the Spirit herself, she pronounced blessings to Mary, baby Jesus, herself, and to all who believe in the Word of the Lord.

A Common Response

Filled with humility and assurance, Mary responded to Elizabeth's prophecy with a song of praise. This song has been known as "The Magnificat" since Mary says that her "soul magnifies the Lord." In contrast to the hypocrites who praise God with their mouths, Mary's praise comes from her innermost parts. She magnifies God from her heart.

People like Mary and Elizabeth can truly magnify the Lord. These are people who acknowledge their humble estate and are overwhelmed by the condescension of the magnificent God. Hannah is one example. She expressed a similar song recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Hannah had no children and was abused by other women because of it. She prayed that the Lord would give her a son and He did. This was her song:

My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord.

My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation.

There is none holy like the Lord; there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by his actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength.

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.

The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts.

He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail.

The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven.

The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed.”

While there are no exact matches between the song of Hannah and Mary, there are some strong parallels. Mary was well learned in the Old Testament, being a Jew. God's truth must have come naturally to her lips as she sang.

7. What are some of the parallels that you noticed?
8. What is the overall feel and sense of the songs?
9. How does Mary characterize the Lord and how does she characterize herself (and people in general)?
10. What can we learn from this (and the former lessons)? What is this imploring us to do?
11. In what ways do you require change? How will your prayers be altered in light of this?

John Piper is famous for saying, “Missions exist because worship doesn't.” Underlying this statement is the truth that people who do not see themselves to be low will not see the Lord to be High. Therefore, they will not sing to Him the praise that He is due. The lack of true worship is the evidence of a lack of true conversion. Praise is the evidence of genuine faith – a faith that is strengthened by God's Word. It is a faith that recognizes one's own lowly estate.

Closing the Series

In these few lessons, we unraveled the beginning of the most spectacular time in human history – the breaking of God's silence. It is not only spectacular in how He did it, but also why He did it and what He did through it.

For four thousand years, God was teaching man about a coming Savior who would take away the sins of His people. He said it over and over giving them signs, messages, traditions, poems, and more. And as He promised, God spoke once more and for a final time. He expressed Himself in human form giving a relatable shape to His infinite goodness. In sending of His Son to be a man in order to pay the perfect price for man, God said all that needed to be said. The question now is this: When God speaks, how will you respond?