

The Witness goes on

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[0 : 0 0] Verse 39, we read, 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.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leapt in her womb, 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.

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. Amen. You might think, well, this isn't a very appropriate passage to read at the end of a communion season.

I mean, this is looking at the Lord's birth and the situations before it rather than his death. But the point here is Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for an encounter and for what has been received.

[1 : 0 3] And we find here Mary coming to see Elizabeth at the time when, I won't say unbeknown to her, because she has had the visit from the angel Gabriel, but unbeknown to anybody else, the Lord Jesus Christ is already physically present within her.

Albeit at this stage in the process, she'll be no more than a pinhead size within her womb. Nobody else except her, her very self, and the Lord knows about this, except those to whom the Lord reveals it.

And the Lord reveals it here to Elizabeth, who shouts, whence is this to me? Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

Because when she hears the greeting of Mary, and notice what it says, when she hears the greeting of Mary, it's not a case of, she has a look, says, oh my goodness, there's a wee bump there, you must be expecting.

Yes, it's something special. The baby in my womb leapt as well. No, she hasn't even turned her head to see her in the doorway. There is no bump as yet. There's nothing. Mary has just had the announcement from the angel Gabriel.

[2 : 1 4] She has just made her way to the hill country of Judah. Nobody knows about it. There is nothing to show. It's just that the Lord has revealed to Elizabeth that Mary is carrying the Messiah within.

And this is a personal encounter, the first personal encounter between certainly Elizabeth and what we might still at this stage call Christ in the flesh.

Since he has not yet been born into the world, but he is certainly in the flesh. And the surprise is personal. It's not a case of, oh, well, aren't you amazingly blessed, Mary?

Because, imagine, you of all people being given this privilege. But rather, it's almost as though there is no surprise that Mary should be given this privilege. Blessed is she among women who has believed what's been told about her.

But what is the reason? Whence is this to me? Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Now, she's seen Mary before. Mary is not the big deal.

[3 : 15] Her cousin is not the big deal. The big deal is that now her cousin is blessed in this way that she is bearing Christ within. And Elizabeth considers herself blessed and surprised by the privilege of having been able to personally encounter, as it were, Christ.

To have seen something of the fulfillment of all the scriptures, all that they were leading up to. And she has lived to see and to know that the Messiah is on the way.

And there is this personal encounter between the Messiah's mother and he is already there in her womb. And the surprise is personal. Even though she will not see him physically the whole time that Mary is there with her.

We read, Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. And during that time, yes, a little bump may become visible for those who know and are able to feel as Elizabeth would be able to.

But nobody else knows. Joseph certainly doesn't know at this stage. It is only after Mary comes back from Elizabeth and visiting her that clearly it has become obvious to everyone that Mary is with child.

[4 : 36] The birth of Jesus Christ, if we go to Matthew chapter 1, took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.

Now you do not find somebody to be with child unless there is some visible evidence, some kind of growth, some kind of bump, for example. She has been away, she comes back, and now she is visibly expecting.

And Joseph, of course, wants to just quietly put her away. But that is when the angel appears to him and says, Don't be afraid. Take Mary as your wife because what is within her is of the Holy Ghost.

But Elizabeth knows that she is blessed to encounter, as it were, albeit at one fleshly stage, removed to encounter Christ.

What is the reason for this blessing? Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? And she is only now the mother of her Lord because she carries Christ within her.

[5 : 41] The surprise is personal. Elizabeth can see nothing, but she knows that Jesus is there. Now it may be that over this past few days, you may have been blessed or privileged with some kind of personal encounter with Christ.

And if that has been the case, then probably you will have been surprised by it. And you won't have been surprised that, oh, that this should ever happen because you know and you read of these kind of things happening, you know of other people who have been blessed with the Lord's visitation or presence or times of real spiritual blessing.

You're not surprised that it happens. You're surprised that it happens to you. You're surprised that you should be blessed with such an encounter. If the Lord has made a personal visit, as it were, into your heart, into your life, there is surprise that why should he choose little me?

Why should he choose to visit me in this way? And you might say, well, come on, this isn't really Jesus choosing to go and visit Elizabeth. I mean, it's Mary coming to do it. So a person is coming, bringing, as it were, Christ with them.

You won't have physically met with Jesus in the body here over these last few days, but you may well have met with Christ in and through the persons that are his in these past days.

[7 : 03] I'm not trying to be clever with words here. We carry Christ within us if we belong to him. He hopefully lives within us and shines out from us. When we encounter Christ, when we encounter the Lord's people, when the Lord's people come together on occasions like these, then the spiritual temperature ought to be higher.

It's like if you've got people scattered right over a whole moor, each one with a little light or a little candle or whatever, then you've got one candle power with each of them all over this black moor in the middle of the night.

But if you bring all these, however many hundred people, together with their candles and the light that you bring together gets brighter and brighter and brighter and hotter and hotter and hotter the number of candle power that you add to it.

If each one is bearing Christ within them, Christ living within them, and they're coming together, the heat gets stronger. The light should be giving out more. Such that if you bring all these people together across from a black moor or whatever, gather them into one place, then it should be such a kind of light that a satellite could pick it up with infrared or whatever from outer space.

Because the light will become so intense and the heat will become so intense because you're bringing together these little individual, if I can put it in this terms reverently, Christ bearers.

[8 : 23] If we have Christ within us, bringing each one of us together, one with another, should increase the temperature, should increase the spiritual light.

And as we come into such a gathering, such an atmosphere, we should be the more conscious of it. Used to be in former ages, and encountered a wee bit of this to an extent myself, in the past, if you'd go to certain places at certain times, you could sense the Lord's presence in a place.

You could sense it even before you began to speak to anyone and before you began to climb into a pulpit or open your mouth, you could sense the Lord's presence in a place. What would cause that in a place?

What would cause there to be that spiritual sense of God's presence? What, because He's more present in one place than in another? Because He's here but He's not there? No, it's because of His people there.

God is covenanted to be in the midst wherever His people gather. And where His people are in communion with Him, in touch with Him, where they're in a praying relationship with Him, then the Lord is covenanted to be there.

[9 : 30] And when the Lord comes down amongst His people, because they're in that relationship with Him, then you will be conscious of that presence. You cannot help but be. The surprise of encountering Christ is personal.

It's not that we are surprised that He is there. It's surprised that we ourselves encounter Him. Elizabeth is surprised that she is blessed in this way.

You might think, oh yes, she's just pleased to see Mary. No, she's seen Mary before. She's her cousin. She knows who Mary is. She hasn't even turned to look at her yet when she heard, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary.

The implication is she's not actually looking in her direction. The baby leapt in her womb 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.

What fruit of her womb? As yet, nobody knows. The only reason Elizabeth knows is because the Holy Spirit has revealed it to her. The Lord has revealed to her that He is there in the flesh in the womb of her cousin.

[10 : 40] This is a special, personal, privileged encounter and because of it Elizabeth is surprised. We are always in a sense surprised.

Not that the Lord should reveal Himself but that He should ever reveal Himself to us. And that's the surprise. The surprise is personal. And yet, here she is. She's filled with the Holy Spirit and then she says her spiel and then Mary says her spiel what is commonly referred to as the Magnificat, this outpouring, my soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour and so on for the next few verses.

And then we read Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. Now three months is like 90 days. How long do we suppose it took Elizabeth to say the things that she had?

Maybe two minutes? And how long would you think it took me to actually pour out the words of the Magnificat? Maybe another two minutes. So you've got like in the space of five minutes you've got some of the most spectacular outpourings of grace from these two women in the space of about five minutes and it's all recorded here in Scripture.

But then the other three months they spend together we don't really have a word about. And yet that ongoing encounter between Elizabeth the child in her womb who would be John the Baptist Mary the child in her womb who would be the Lord Jesus Christ is always ongoing there.

[12 : 10] But the spectacular is brief. The spectacular outpouring of inspiration. You know whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come unto me?

And she's got this this particular visitation of God's Spirit inspiring her tongue. And Mary likewise you know my soul magnifies the Lord my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

How long does it take to say these things? Maybe five minutes in total. Let's be generous and give them five minutes each. Let's say that maybe in the original Hebrew or Aramaic or whatever they say it took longer to say so let's give them five minutes each.

It won't have taken five minutes each. But let's be generous. So ten minutes ten minutes out of ninety days you've got this massive outpouring of inspiration in the mouths of these two women one old one comparatively young.

And they encounter one another and the Lord fills them both with the Spirit. But then they carry on just living and working and being together for the next three months. The spectacular is brief. The surprise is personal the spectacular is brief.

[13 : 21] We long sometimes for the spectacular don't we? and we like to think oh well if somebody's had a spectacular conversion experience like Saul of Damascus then it must be more genuine than mine somehow.

And it must be that which really mattered and really counted even if it was. It only lasts a very short time. Even if we take the whole of Saul's experience as being part of the dramatic you know blinding literally blinding like the three days that he was without sight and didn't eat or drink not especially nice experience to go through all that time but three days out of his whole life it's brief.

The spectacular is brief. You can't live your Christian life on the spectacular. It may be wonderful for a brief moment a fizzing firework of spiritual delight but the spectacular is brief.

This is what we find here. Think about how long it would take Elizabeth to pour out this greeting to Mary and the knowledge of who she carried in her womb.

Think of how long even it would take Mary to speak out the words of the Magnificat. You're only looking at a couple of minutes really. You're only looking at that which is yes spirit filled and powerful but the spectacular is brief.

[14 : 47] We cannot build our hopes of a relationship in Christ on that which is spectacular. Supposing just for the sake of argument that these past few days had been for you personally the most spectacular communion season you had ever had.

I don't imagine they are but if they had been it would have been wonderful but you know here we are on the last day it's all coming to an end. Five days but gone now.

You see if you felt these past few days well you know talking about personal encounter with Christ I have to say I didn't personally feel much maybe other people around me did and I feel guilty now that I'm saying wow yes wasn't it fantastic wasn't it great wasn't it brilliant maybe it was for you and that's wonderful if it was but it might have been like that for your neighbour but not for you.

You might be the one sitting there thinking oh well I'm really unspiritual because I can't say oh yes wasn't it wonderful Lord it was good it was fine but maybe it wasn't spectacular for me it might have been spectacular for somebody else I might not be Elizabeth I might not be the one filled with the spirit and pouring out God's praises I might just be your neighbour I might not be the person who is so specially blessed I might not be experiencing anything spectacular if you did give thanks to God and if you didn't give thanks to God for what for that other thing for the fact that as we see here Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home whether or not the spectacular lasted or whether it happened for you the important thing for Elizabeth will not simply be that five minute encounter at the beginning what will Elizabeth appreciate she will appreciate more than anything the fact that Mary came and that Mary carries within her womb the Messiah and that there they both are

Jesus inside and Mary on the outside there with her and Zacharias there spending time there abiding with them there staying with them that is the thing you've got to rejoice in my friend the fact that the Lord Jesus does not go away from you and that whether or not there may be a spectacular experience or encounter for you personally whether you are filled with the Spirit in such a way you just want to pour out wonderful words of praise or perhaps not the point is that he abides with those that he comes to he stays with them he does not depart from them the surprise is personal the spectacular is brief the time together is sweet there is the time that Mary spends with Elizabeth Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home the time together is sweet simply because it is time together it may not be spectacular for you these last few days but the Lord has been in the midst of his people and that is something truly to give thanks for because where the

[18:08] Lord gathers with his people we are blessed and we are I would suggest to you aware of greater nearness of the Lord at such a time the time together is sweet but and this is part of the truth also of every communion season however many you have had however many or few still await us the time together is sweet but the next phase awaits the witness is ongoing Mary spends three months with Elizabeth I expect they were fantastic to be able to be with her cousin to be able to share their own secret experiences of what they are going through both with a child growing inside them but sooner or later very quickly no doubt after the three months Mary has to go home Elizabeth has to carry on it's nearly her time and even though oh yes joyful wonderful time we think but as you know midwives have mentioned in the past there's no such thing as an ordinary straightforward birth except in retrospect and Elizabeth was not a young woman and this was the first time she was facing childbirth and it would have been a frightening experience it would have been something she'd have been worried about she would have loved

Mary to stay but she couldn't and Mary for her part three months are up she's going back now to Nazareth now there is going to be a bump now everybody's going to know now whatever music has to be faced she's going to have to face it not alone but with the Lord and not much else time together is sweet but the next phase awaits and the next phase probably won't be fun in the short term whatever is ahead for you in the coming week or weeks it will probably be work related it will probably be less pleasant than the last few days of communion together and fellowship one with another and so on there will be a measure of the mundane a measure of the ordinary a measure of demands that will be made upon you which may or may not have been put on hold over the last few days but the next phase awaits the next phase is always going to await we always have to come down from the mountain the next phase awaits and the witness is ongoing it will not impress anyone it will not make your faith or your relationship with

Christ look more true if you can be a wonderful spirit filled Christian at communion season but when you get back to your everyday mundane work oh you're full of bitterness and a bad spirit and the world and all the rest of it now we've got to take Christ with us we've got to have Christ with us in every ordinary task and duty and employment the witness is ongoing and the next phase awaits and Mary going back to Nazareth and Joseph being visited by the angel in his dream and being prepared to take on Mary as his wife that's just as important as what has gone on up to now and Elizabeth giving birth to John the Baptist and testifying his name is John and Zacharias getting the chance to say yes it is John and then his own tongue being loosed and all the glorious witness that pours forth from his tongue then as we read towards the end of the chapter there that's just as important as the three months these two women spent together their time together fellowship is sweet but it's short it's brief and the next phase always awaits however many communion seasons you may have had my friend however many still await you they will always pass and then the next phase awaits and the next phase the work the life balance the difficulties the hassles and life is full of hassles in this fallen world it's just as important as whatever you've just had in the last few days the next phase awaits and the witness is ongoing but the Lord is there throughout however unseen just as he was with them in that three months together

Elizabeth never set eyes on the baby Jesus at this stage certainly didn't have ultrasound scans in those days she may have felt Mary's tummy she may have felt a little kick but she didn't see him she did not see Jesus in the flesh and we do not see Jesus in the flesh doesn't matter how good this past communion season may have been for you personally you didn't see Jesus in the flesh but you will have encountered Jesus in the spirit if you're trusting in him the Lord is there throughout however unseen and he's there not only in the times of closeness and sweetness and spiritual blessing he's there also when the witness has to go on when we go back to the mundane when we go back to the problems and difficulties and issues of life the Lord is there throughout however unseen you may never set your eyes on his flesh this side of eternity but he is there and he will continue to be there not just at the communion season but in the workshop and in the office and in the home and in the kitchen and in the encounter and in the meeting and in all the hassles and all the amount of work that may seem to be overwhelming you he will be there he will be there in it and he will be there with you in it you may be surprised personally that he is what he is the Lord is there throughout and the

Lord being there in our lives is that by which we if we are Christians are defined we are defined by being the Lords we are defined in some people's eyes by the job that we do somebody might look at me and say oh yeah well he's a minister but that's just the job that I do somebody else might say well he's a factory worker or she's an office manager or whatever it might be but that's just the job you do the thing that ultimately defines you more than anything else your identity that's more important than your gender as a man or a woman that's more important than your nationality as Scottish or English or any other nation under heaven the thing that defines you and separates you from the rest of humanity or not as the case may be is that relationship with Christ we are defined by our relationship to Christ or lack of it because when the only separation that matters finally takes place when the king will finally separate the sheep to his right and the goats to his left it will not matter what nationality you were or what language you spoke or what gender you were or what job you did it will be your relationship to him that defines you just as it must be what defines you here on earth whatever else you are or are not

[25 : 40] I am not a minister of the gospel first and foremost I am a Christian first and foremost that is the most important thing in my life in my heart in my being not what job I may do or even what the Lord may have called me to serve him in this capacity or that capacity but that I belong to Christ and that is the thing that defines likewise every Christian that he or she belongs to Christ and that by which you are defined is already in place whether you know it or not you see one of the things the Bible teaches is that the Lord's children are already elect in his heart from all eternity from all eternity that means that before the Lord ever opened his mouth and said let there be light and brought all the planets and stars and constellations into being through that first week of his creation before ever he formed this earth and put creatures on it and the waves of the sea and the sun and the moon and the stars and all that he did before he ever created man in his image he already knew the identity and personality and exact number of every single one who would be his that by which you are defined is already in place let's take a personal an illustration of that in human terms if we go back again to

Matthew's account which we thought of which we mentioned a minute ago Joseph does not yet know that his fiancée is expecting she's going away south to the hill country of Judea and she comes back suddenly she is very evidently with child he doesn't know what he's going to do he thinks he knows what he's going to do but the Lord is going to appear to him and tell him what he's going to do but Joseph is going to be and is already defined by that which is already in place in Mary's womb what is it that makes Joseph who he is we don't hear much about Joseph beyond the birth of Jesus and that single encounter perhaps when they go off to the temple when he's 12 but his calling in life the task to which the Lord calls him is to be the husband of Mary and the foster father of our Lord and he must have been quite a special guy you know just as Mary was chosen uniquely to carry the

Lord and her woman to be his earthly mother so Joseph is chosen to be his earthly father now in terms of terms of when you consider that Jesus true father his ultimate father is God how can you ever get an individual who's ever going to measure up to that in any way well that's true but here the Lord has chosen this man who must have been a good man he must have been a pretty special man in many ways because he is about to be defined by that which is already in place Jesus is already there in the womb of Joseph's fiancée except that Joseph doesn't know it yet and he is going to be defined for all of his life by the decision that he takes now which God is telling him what to do and that by which Joseph is going to be defined for all of his life and for all history and for all eternity is already in place it's already there that by which you are defined is already in place why because the Lord has not gone from us in that episode in

Matthew chapter 1 when he says you shall call his name Jesus which means he will save his people from their sins all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son they shall call his name Emmanuel which means God with us he's already there it is already in place that by which you are defined now of course what we have just had in terms of our communion season you may have as we say may have spectacularly blessed you or it may have left you thinking okay well that was fine wasn't the best I've ever had but you know it was good thank you Lord for it just as ordinary food sustains us for a little while but you're still going to need to be fed again the next day to that extent it doesn't really make a difference whether you sat down to fill it steak with all the trimmings or whether it was the spiritual equivalent of a bowl of porridge and a mug of tea because the point is nourishes that it nourishes you it strengthens you it fills you and it gives you the strength for the next stage of the journey whatever it may be if you have the best meal and the best restaurant that you ever had in your entire life it doesn't mean that because it was the most spectacular and superb meal you ever tasted that's going to sustain you for a week as if you just had the bowl of porridge that's only going to do you for half a day it doesn't matter about the quality in that sense the point is it sustains you it feeds you it blesses you it keeps you going and the

Lord's supper remember Jesus says is to be continued in his church as a memorial of his death until he comes again that means you don't just do it once it's not like a baptism you get it done once that's it done the Lord's supper now that's me for the next 60 years don't have to do it again no it's to be done regularly just as you feed your body every day you need to feed your soul yes with his word with the reading with the hearing with the prayer life of it but every now and then these solemn sacramental occasions come and they likewise feed our soul and it may have been the most special time you ever had or for you personally it may not have been so spectacular it might not have been for you personally the fillet steak in the fancy restaurant it might just have been the bowl of porridge with a mug of tea but it sustains you until the next stage I always think of Elijah at these times and the angel that appears to me as he's sleeping there under the juniper tree and wakens him up and he wakens up and there at his head there's a cake baking on the coals and a cruise of water and the angel says rise and eat for the journey is too great for thee it doesn't mean the journey is too great for you're not going to make it he says you're not going to make it unless you eat and drink what the lord provides for you unless you make use of what god gives and here and here he says he says he says he says he says and then he went in the strength of that meat 40 days and 40 nights we don't know how long we'll need to go in the strength of this spiritual meat for he said well next communion season will be six months away might be less than that before you attend another communion season somewhere else might be less than that before you sit again at the lord's table might be more than that because something might happen and you might not get to the next one or you might be detained or you might be in hospital or you might be away at work or something else might happen we do not know what the future holds however long your 40 days and 40 nights is going to prove to be the lord has given you sufficient for the next stage of the journey whether it's fillet steak whether it's your favorite meal whether it's just a piece of bread to keep you going whether it's the bowl of porridge whatever it is the point is that it sustains you with something that is sufficient for the purpose sufficient for the next stage of the journey and that is what the lord intends to give you sufficient for the next stage other than the day before the sabbath the lord did not give the israelites enough manna for a week store it up in your tents and then you won't have to bother going out and gathering it in give you loads give you plenty give you till you're coming out your ears no they had to go and gather every day except on the day before the sabbath when he gave them double so they wouldn't go out and gather on the sabbath day just enough for that time just enough for this time just enough for what you need the lord provides until the next stage of the journey so whatever it may have been for you individually if it was something personally spiritually spectacular then my guess is you will have been surprised by that not that the lord works but that he should have done something spectacular for you that's

[34 : 59] Elizabeth's surprise here whence is this to me that the mother of my lord should come to me not that she should be anywhere but she's come to me with christ in her womb why should the lord visit me personally why should I have this time a great blessing just now if it's not happening for other people around it the surprise is personal it doesn't matter though how spectacular it may have been the spectacular is always brief time together is sweet but the next phase always awaits and the witness is ongoing but the lord is there throughout however unseen the lord is always there throughout that by which you are defined is already in place and whatever you may think the quality or sweetness or beauty or whatever you partake in all it has been there to sustain you for the next stage however long or short that may prove to be we are not here tonight necessarily to rejoice in the spectacular it may have been spectacular and you may have caused to rejoice in that praise the lord if you do but we are not here necessarily to rejoice in the spectacular but to give thanks for the savior and for his death which has purchased life for us our savior who defines us by our relationship to him our savior who is always with us because that's what his name means

Emmanuel God with us for whom we give thanks let us pray our