

Mary Visits Elizabeth

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[0 : 00] We're looking this morning at Luke 1, 39 through 45. In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to a town in Judah.

Mary meets Elizabeth. Most of us live in our own wee world of compartments, home, work, church, and leisure.

It's strange still, though, when two of these compartments meet in unexpected places at unexpected times. So as a family, for example, you're eating out at a restaurant.

And unexpectedly, at the next table, a work colleague of yours and his family are enjoying a meal.

Two worlds collide. Perhaps you didn't even know that your colleague was married with children.

And now you're meeting his family. You're not sure what to talk about because all you've ever talked about with your colleague before is work. It's strange when the barriers between our compartments disappear and when two worlds collide.

[1 : 11] Now this passage in Luke 1 is the story of two worlds colliding. Or more accurately, the story of two ages combining.

The age of the Old Testament and the age of the New Testament. The age of prophecy and the age of fulfillment. The age of speaking in riddles and the age of speaking clearly.

You must think, I'm speaking in riddles. But I hope that throughout this study that the riddle will begin to unravel. And you'll begin to understand just how important, actually how crucial, this passage of scripture really is.

Let's consider this passage, Mary meets Elizabeth, under four headings. Fellowship, filling, fulfillment, and faith.

First of all, fellowship. Fellowship. We don't know how soon after, but very soon after the angel Gabriel had told Mary that a child would be miraculously conceived in her womb.

[2 : 24] Mary traveled to see her elderly relative Elizabeth. Who herself, even though she was very old, was six months into her pregnancy. So here we have two relatives.

Both of whom are pregnant. Seeking each other's company. It's a natural thing. You see it all the time. Expectant mother's support groups. Go to a coffee shop in Shollands on a weekday morning and you'll find gaggles of young mums with their bairns.

Hanging about together, sharing stories, enjoying each other's company. But there's more to it than this. You see, it's Mary who goes to visit Elizabeth.

Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. In verse 36, the angel Gabriel reveals to Mary that Elizabeth is six months pregnant. And so I wonder whether Mary was motivated to go to Elizabeth, not just so that they could share stories and support each other, but because this is the kind of godly, righteous person Mary was.

Someone who, having heard that her elderly relative was heavily pregnant, went to offer whatever help and support she could. Did Mary, the Lord's servant, verse 36, the mother of our Lord, cook meals for Elizabeth and Zechariah?

[3 : 54] Did she fetch them water from the well? Did she wash their dirty clothes? I don't think I'm over-speculating to suggest that this is the real reason Mary visited Elizabeth.

To help her in the latter stages of her pregnancy. To serve her in whatever way she could. And you know, this opens up a fascinating avenue of thought for us all, does it not?

Regarding Jesus, her son. Speaking of Jesus' human growth and development, where did Jesus learn to serve others in such a menial, down-to-earth way?

Where did Jesus first see a heart that was filled with compassion and a will determined to meet the needs of others? Was it not from his mother Mary?

And yes, there's a lesson for us also here. Our children learn far more from us than we think they do. What am I teaching my children?

[5 : 01] What are you teaching your children? Are we teaching them how to serve others? How to love others? Or are we teaching them, by our bad example, how to be selfish, bad-tempered, and proud?

It's a challenge, isn't it? But I think there's even more going on here than first meets the eye. So let's put our thinking caps on. Two worlds are colliding.

One world is represented by Elizabeth with John the Baptist in her womb. Even though he's spoken about in the New Testament, John the Baptist is the last of the great Old Testament prophets.

His role is to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord by preaching a message of repentance and faith. The exact same message preached by Isaiah and Hosea, by Micah, and by Malachi.

So Elizabeth, with John the Baptist in her womb, represents the Old Testament. The world with which the Old Testament is colliding is represented by Mary with the very early stage pregnancy of Jesus in her womb.

[6 : 21] Jesus the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the Old Testament, the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies concerning how God will save his people by sending them a servant king to bear their sins and iniquities.

His message will be, His message will be, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel. So in essence, while John the Baptist's message, summarizing that of the Old Testament, is the kingdom of God is coming, Jesus' message, summarizing the New Testament, is the kingdom of God is here.

It's that riddle which I spoke earlier of unraveling in your mind somewhat. Are you beginning to understand how in the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary, two worlds are colliding?

The world of coming and being. The world of prophecy and the world of fulfillment. The world of the Old Testament and the world of the New Testament.

Thankfully, I get the sense that evangelical atheism seems to be on the decline. The coronavirus has exposed the fallacy that lies at its heart.

[7 : 41] The fallacy of reductionism. However, one of the things that the evangelical atheists used to bang on about, ad nauseum, was how different the gods of the Old Testament and New Testament were.

Of how the God of the Old Testament was nothing like the God of the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament was full of anger and wrath. The Old Testament is law.

The God of the New Testament is full of love and compassion. The message of the New Testament is love. Well, in some ways, fair enough, a surface reading of Joshua and Philippians are very different from each other.

But tell me, when the Old Testament and the New Testament meet, in the fellowship between Elizabeth and Mary, is there any hostility between them?

Or incompatibility between them? It's plain to see that not only is there no hostility, but the two enjoy the closest of agreement. The Old Testament and the New Testament are hand in glove.

[8 : 48] They give each other life. They give each other life. They rejoice in each other's company. One belongs to the other. The same message. The same God. The same salvation.

Brought together in the fellowship of two mothers. Elizabeth and Mary. And this is the ultimate fellowship to which I'm referring in this point. Not just the fellowship of two pregnant women, but the fellowship of the two testaments, of the two ages.

The age pre-Christ and Christ himself. Now, there are many applications to this point that we could make, but let me point out just one.

You cannot and you must not read one testament apart from the other. You cannot just read Mark and ignore Malachi, nor can you just read Genesis, but ignore John.

The two testaments belong together. Just as Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, so the Old Testament fills Jesus' life and mission with meaning and significant.

[9 : 57] You must not over-separate out the New Testament church from the Old Testament people of God, the one spiritual, the other national. All of Scripture, as Jesus will later say, testifies to him as Savior.

All of it, even Amos, as Matthias read to us. It is one fellowship. Two worlds colliding. One Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is the basis of the biblical doctrine of covenant theology. That doctrine, by the way, from which we derive the practice of covenant infant baptism.

The Old Testament and the New Testament belong together, not apart. And Jesus is in every page. Fellowship.

Second, filling. Filling. If my previous point about fellowship reinforces one of Luke's central messages in Luke Acts, namely the fulfillment of the Old Testament, what we called a couple of weeks ago continuity, discontinuity, this point introduces another of Luke's central messages in Luke Acts, something which cannot be ignored if you want to do justice to the Bible or to Christian experience.

[11 : 27] Let me read you a few texts from the earlier portions of Luke 1. Verse 15. Speaking of John the Baptist. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

Verse 35. Speaking of the miraculous conception of Jesus in Mary's womb. The Holy Spirit will come upon you. Verse 41.

Speaking of Elizabeth's reaction to Mary's visit. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. You see the common theme? The activity of the Holy Spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit filled John the Baptist even in his mother's womb. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary's barren womb and brought forth a child.

The Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth's mouth with praise and with worship. Luke is introducing us to the mysterious world and activity of the Holy Spirit, the gracious third person of the Trinity.

[12 : 38] These great saints were filled with the Holy Spirit, as we'll discover throughout Luke and Acts, all the greats of the faith were also. Remember, Luke is writing to Gentile Christians who feel rather like second-class citizens in the Christian church.

And he's saying to them, but the same Holy Spirit who fills you filled the fathers and the mothers of the Jewish church, that they as Gentile Christians belong in the church by virtue of their filling by the Holy Spirit.

It's the Holy Spirit who is the bond of union between Gentile and Jew in the church, not a shared ethnicity, not a cultural heritage. This is what ultimately brought the apostles in the book of Acts to recognize that God was working among the Gentiles and therefore to include them among the members of the church.

For example, in Acts 10, 47, when Peter was amazed by the conversion of the Gentile Roman centurion Cornelius, he said, Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just like us?

So you see, the filling of the Holy Spirit here in Luke chapter 1 fits into Luke's broader theme throughout Luke and Acts of belonging in the Christian church.

[14 : 17] That all who have faith in Christ and are filled by His Spirit belong as fellow members of the Christian church. You belong. No matter your ethnicity, no matter your background, faith in Christ and the filling of the Spirit qualifies you to be an equal partner and family member of the Christian church.

Two worlds collide, Gentile and Jewish. The historical compartments they have kept tightly shut for generations are blown apart in Luke 1 by the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Later on in the Apostle Paul appealing to the Ephesian church to be united, he does not frame as the fundamental foundation of their unity their shared heritage, their shared ethnicity, their shared language, their shared color, their shared gender, their shared traditions.

Rather, in Ephesians 4 verse 3, he talks of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Here then, is the fundamental foundation of our unity as Glasgow City Free Church.

It is not a shared ethnic identity. It is not a shared language. It is not a shared heritage. It is a shared Holy Spirit.

[15 : 54] And this must be the basis of our oneness in Christ, lest we're no more than a social interest group or a club. Well, listen again to what I'm saying.

Maybe this is your first time here today. You belong here where the whole world collides and finds oneness in the Spirit of God.

Third, fulfillment, fulfillment. I hope that as we're going along, you're beginning to see how the riddle I set for you at the beginning is unraveling of how in this passage, two worlds are colliding, that of Old and New Testaments, as prophecy meets fulfillment, as John the Baptist meets Jesus.

Now, the keynote of this passage is that of joy. Not so much joy at the coming of Mary, but joy in the coming of Mary as the mother of our Lord.

How did Elizabeth know what had happened? What the angel Gabriel had said to Mary? We really don't know, but this is for sure.

[17 : 12] Elizabeth and the child in her womb recognized, when Mary walked through the door, that the Lord had come. The very same Lord, Zechariah, John's father, had been told it was his son's mission to prepare for.

Now, there's very little doubt that when Elizabeth uses the word Lord, she is talking about the Messiah.

This Jewish Messiah, or as we talk of him, the Christ, had been prophesied for literally thousands of years, from Moses to Isaiah.

The Jewish prophets had spoken of a figure God would send to liberate and to save his people. Over the centuries, many men had risen up to lead Jewish military resistance against the aggression of invaders, but all of them, without exception, had failed to institute lasting change. The kingdoms they founded lasted for a generation and then fell. Over and over again, the Jews had been disappointed as one Messiah figure after another had proved to be unreliable, ineffective, duplicitous, and false.

[18 : 39] So for hundreds of years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, the Jews as a nation had suffered greatly at the hands of invaders and oppressors.

They had all but given up hope that God would ever keep his promise to send a Messiah to liberate and save them from their oppressors. All righteous Jews would wake up in the morning, open the curtains and say to themselves, will he come today?

But in their heart of hearts, most of them had stopped believing that such a thing would ever happen. But now in this small house, in this small village, the name of which we do not even know, Elizabeth recognizes that God has finally kept the promise and fulfilled all these prophecies made thousands and thousands and thousands of years before.

Elizabeth realizes that Mary carries within her Israel's Messiah. To what extent she understood what kind of Messiah Jesus would be is not clear.

Did she think that Jesus would be warlike and violent? We don't know. But this she did know. Her relative was carrying within her womb the fulfillment of all of God's promises to his people.

[20 : 03] Likewise, to what extent Elizabeth understood who this Messiah really was is unclear. Did she know that Mary carried within her womb the word who was with God having become flesh dwelling among his people?

I wonder whether she knew more about this than we might think. After all, she calls the child in Mary's womb the Lord in verse 43.

But she also uses exactly the same word Lord to describe the God who had spoken to Mary through the angel. Maybe Elizabeth knew that this was no ordinary child in Mary's womb.

We'll know one day. We could ask her one day, but not now. What we do know is that all the joy at the coming of Mary, the mother of our Lord, the leaping of the infant in Elizabeth's womb was caused by the awareness of God's fundamental promises, the fulfillment of God's fundamental promise to send the Messiah to liberate and save his people.

Remember, in our story, Elizabeth and her child represent the Old Testament, the Old Testament which is filled with messianic prophecies, songs and stories designed to point to the coming of the Messiah.

[21 : 35] I'm asking, what is the reaction to all these Old Testament songs and all these Old Testament prophecies and all these Old Testament stories to the coming of the Messiah?

It is sheer and adulterated joy. It is as if Isaiah is leaping in the womb of Elizabeth.

Yes, Isaiah and David, the blessed psalm writer. Yes, Moses. Yes, Abraham. You might even think that Elizabeth's got rather a crowded womb here.

She has 40 feet four Old Testament books in there. But they're all headed up by the last and the greatest of all their prophets, John the Baptist.

So you see, the reason why there's such joy at the coming of Mary as the mother of our Lord is that it signifies the fulfillment of millennium-old prophecies and promises promises from God.

[22 : 46] What is the Old Testament reaction to the kingdom of Christ? That kingdom which welcomes Gentiles and Jews, which welcomes those who believe in Christ Jesus as Lord, not merely those who are circumcised according to the flesh.

The answer is here, pure, unadulterated joy. What would Moses and Abraham and David and Isaiah have thought of Gentiles flooding into the early church, professing their name, professing their faith in Christ?

What would their reaction have been? Pure joy. What would Moses and Abraham have thought of Christian churches being planted in Europe and in Asia and in America and in Africa?

David would have danced for joy even as John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb. For you see two worlds are colliding here.

The world of promise and prophecy, John the Baptist, with the world of fulfillment and reality, Jesus. Do you know that what we're reading of here in Luke 1, 39, 45, is happening all over the world at this very moment?

[24 : 08] And I pray it would happen with increasing frequency here in Glasgow City Free Church. Namely, that those who meet Jesus for the first time are filled with joy.

They meet Jesus and they're changed forever because their sins are taken away and they're guilt atoned for. For the first time in their lives they feel truly loved and their responses to leap in the air with joy.

Perhaps, my friend, your joy in meeting with Christ has subsided over the years. Perhaps you've grown spiritually cold and that sense of wonder Elizabeth had all those years ago has gone.

Can you ever get it back? How can you get it back? Surely, stage one is to recognize just how unique and glorious Jesus Christ is.

He is not as others. He is the fulfillment, not just of a thousand years of Jewish prophecy. He is the fulfillment of the whole universe.

[25 : 31] Everything points to Jesus in this universe of ours. Everything. So begin again with worship and praise. Stage one, getting back that joy that you once had is recognizing just how unique and glorious Jesus Christ is.

Well, our last point today is faith. Faith. Elizabeth's greeting ends with the words, and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

Mary's isn't blessed because she carries within her womb Jesus the Messiah, Mary. Mary is blessed because she believed the word spoken by the Lord through the angel Gabriel to her.

Now, we cannot join Mary in her blessed task of bearing Jesus the Messiah. Such a role was to be hers, and hers alone, it's not ours.

But we can join her in the altogether more blessed task of having faith in the word of God delivered to us. So she heard the word of the angel, you shall conceive and bear a son, and Mary believed.

[26 : 58] She believed it to the extent that rather than questioning whether it would or would not happen, she asked, how shall this happen?

She believed to the extent that she had moved on from the what or the whether to the how. And then in an act of really marvelous and beautiful devotion, I wish I'd spent more time on this last week, I should have divided last week into two sermons, I'm sorry, Mary says, behold, I'm the Lord's servant, I'm his slave, let it be to me as you have said.

And so again, I say to you that her blessedness did not merely consist in her carrying of Jesus the Messiah in her womb, but in her faith in God to fulfill what he promised.

And again I say you can join her today in this. Because of the Old Testament and in the New Testament blessedness and faith go hand in hand.

Whether it's Abraham the patriarch in the Old Testament or Paul the apostle in the New Testament, it is faith in God and his promises which justifies and blesses.

[28 : 22] Mary was blessed not merely because she carried the Messiah in her womb, but because she believed in her heart in the promise of God. And you can join her in this today.

You can join her and Abraham and Moses and Isaiah and John the Baptist and Luke the writer of this gospel and Paul the apostle and Peter and your forefathers in Christ.

And again this action of faith in the promises of God is not dependent upon one's ethnicity or one's heritage, one's background, one's race.

As we go through Luke Acts, we're going to find many different people from many different races putting their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord as fulfillment of God's promise to

