

# Joy for the hearers - Elizabeth's song

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're going to read together in the Scriptures in Luke's Gospel at Chapter 1, and that's on page 855 if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles.

We're going to be looking this morning particularly at what Elizabeth has to say at the end of, well, verses 39 to 45.

But we're going to read in a little bit to get the background of the story, starting at Luke's Gospel, Chapter 1 in verse 5. And Luke tells us, In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah.

And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now, while he was serving as priest before God, when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

[ 1 : 14 ] And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.

And your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John, and you will have joy and gladness. And many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord.

He must not drink wine or strong drink, 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 go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

[ 2 : 19 ] And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this, for I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years? The angel answered him, I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God.

And I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you'll be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized that he had seen a vision in the temple, and he kept making signs to them and remained mute.

When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked upon me to take away my reproach among people.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, would you turn with me to Luke chapter 1, page 856, and we're going to look particularly these verses about Mary visiting Elizabeth, verses 39 to 45.

[ 3 : 47 ] A song of joy for the first, the very first hearers of the good news about the birth, the coming birth of Jesus.

Verse 41 of Luke's gospel, chapter 1, says, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry.

She burst into song. We've been seeing just how Christmas has run with the sound of song right from the very beginning, because, as George Campbell Morgan put it, when Jesus came into the world, poetry expressed itself, and music was reborn.

Heaven's arches rang, and the angels sang, proclaiming the royal decree, as the carol says. And even though the Savior's birth was largely unnoticed by men, there were some on earth who joined

the joy of heaven and who rejoiced in great song.

And they sang for joy. And we've been looking at some of these songs that Luke records in the first two chapters of his gospel. Songs, many songs, for the Savior's birth. And it's right, indeed it's necessary, to sing and to make music in our hearts to God when he is at work doing wonderful things in the world.

[ 5 : 15 ] And that's always been the case. Whenever God's Spirit has been at work in marvelous ways in this world in reviving power, there's been an outbreak of song, of praise to God.

There's been a writing of songs and a singing of songs. Just think of the great awakening in the 18th century and all the hymns that followed that. Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and the like.

Now it's that way around, of course. We mustn't be confused about that. Sometimes people today get rather confused and they think that what we can do is we can induce a great reviving work of God, a great renewing work of God, by singing.

And so there's a tendency to have ever longer and endless times of worship, so-called worship, which means singing to most people to create a spiritual experience.

But that's the wrong way around. It's the other way around. That's back to front. It is actually when God is at work first in his mighty reviving power, when his gospel is being heard, when his gospel is being received and responded to and understood, then people respond with joy and they break forth in songs of joy.

[ 6 : 31 ] And that's exactly what we've been seeing in these first two chapters of Luke's gospel. And that's what we see in this passage today in what is actually, I think, the very first song of Christmas in what Elizabeth speaks here.

Her song doesn't get a fancy Latin name like the other ones, you know, the Benedictus and the Magnificat and the Newt Dimittis and all these other Latin names. But Elizabeth's song actually is the first Benedictus.

Because while her husband, Zechariah, who gets credited with the Benedictus, while he's still dumb and can't speak, Elizabeth is singing Benedictus, verse 42.

Blessed are you. Now, poor old Zechariah at this stage is still on sign language. The only thing he could offer would be the actions to a song, but he couldn't sing. But Elizabeth doesn't get any posh Latin name, but her song, I'm going to call The Joy of the First Heroes.

In fact, it's a song of this heavenly pregnant woman, Elizabeth, who's going to be the mother of John. And it really is a song of joy, of great joy.

[ 7 : 42 ] In fact, if we're going to be very honest, we'd have to say it's more of a song and dance routine. Because it's Elizabeth and her unborn child, John, who are both involved. And it's John, verse 41, who quite literally kicks things off in the womb.

He's leaping for joy within his mother's womb. So let's start there with John as he responds to the arrival of Mary to visit his mother, carrying, as Mary is, the incarnate Lord of Gloria as a tiny, tiny embryo in her womb.

Look at verse 40. It says that Mary entered the house and greeted Elizabeth and as soon as the words were out of her mouth, we get an extraordinary, miraculous expression of joy.

And the first thing that Luke tells us about the joy of this great occasion is about joy in the womb.

Verse 41, the baby leaped in her womb. And then in Elizabeth's own words in verse 44, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

So the first joy that Luke is pointing us to is joy expressed by John. The intrauterine joy of a spirit-filled unborn child.

[ 9 : 06 ] That's the clear implication of verse 41 when we're told that John leaped for joy. The implication is that he is filled with the spirit just as his mother too we're told was filled with the Holy Spirit.

And that's simply fulfilling what the angel had actually explicitly told Zechariah earlier on as we read in verse 15. Do you see? He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.

Straight up. So here is the very first hearer of the gospel in the Bible. The very first believer leaping for joy is in the womb.

And he dances for joy at the presence of the Savior. And the Savior too is just a tiny embryo in the womb. I wonder if you find that hard to believe.

Well that is plainly what the text in front of us is saying isn't it? Let me reassure you remember who the writer is here it is Luke the physician.

[10:15] He's a doctor. He's not completely out of his field therefore writing about intrauterine matters. He's no fool. Luke is a man of facts.

A careful researcher. He's already said that. He's not somebody who's swayed by mumbo-jumbo and wild stories. He's a man who's swayed by evidence and facts.

We can trust Luke's judgment not to be somebody of wild speculation. He's a careful evidence-seeking sober assessor of all things and presumably especially all things medical.

He's a meticulous physician and he's done his research. And surely I think we can trust him. Look back by the way just to verses 1 to 4. It just reminds us that Luke stakes his entire reputation on what he's writing.

He's researched verse 2 all the way back to the beginning. Verse 3 he's considered all things. He's done so closely and carefully.

[11:23] And so he tells us he's written an orderly account so that we can be certain. And he is absolutely clear in what he writes here.

John a five month old fetus we're into the sixth month just in the womb at the moment Mary arrived bearing her baby Jesus and John leaps for joy.

He rejoices in the presence of the Messiah. Let me quote to you from Howard Marshall who was one of my professors in divinity.

Surely one of the soberest scholars you could possibly find of the New Testament. He says this a miraculous expression of the emotion of the unborn child is meant not that Elizabeth simply saw her own joy reflected in the unconscious movement of her child.

Just like his mother John is filled with the Holy Spirit. This is joy in the womb. The joy of the very first believer. And indeed more than that he is the very first evangelist.

[12:47] What did the angel said? That John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb verse 16 and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

Well here it is. John's spirit filled leaping is what turns his mother to recognize the coming of the Lord. That's what Elizabeth says in verse 44. Absolutely plain.

She recognizes that Mary is bearing her Lord for verse 44. When the sound of your greeting came to my ears the baby in my womb leapt for joy.

That's how she knew. Howard Marshall again. She knew that Mary was to be the mother of the Messiah by the joyous movements of her child in response to Mary's greeting by this intrauterine evangelistic dance.

John the Baptist. What are we to make of all of this? Well, surely it's quite simply this, that everyone in this entire story is caught up with something totally miraculous.

[14:04] This is God's story. And when God is at work in the world, amazing things can happen, and amazing things do happen. See, what Luke is telling us, here, and indeed all through his gospel, but especially here in these opening chapters, is that God is a God who keeps his promises.

And he does so in the most extraordinary of ways. So, verse 37, that's what the angel says to Mary, nothing will be impossible with God.

God makes promises, and we are to believe them and to trust his word. His promises will be fulfilled in their time. That was the angel's rebuke to Zechariah back in verse 20, wasn't it?

They will be fulfilled, and you don't believe it. God always keeps his word, and he can do it in the most wonderful and extraordinary of ways, even filling an unborn child with his Holy Spirit and making him dance for joy.

way. By the way, we shouldn't lose the significance of that either, should we? Of this encounter between Jesus and John, when both of them are still in the womb.

[15:22] John was something less than a 24-week-old fetus at this time. They were into the sixth month of pregnancy. And Jesus, well, could have been no more than just a tiny embryo, what the scientists today would just dismiss as just a ball of cells.

And yet, his presence as just a ball of cells, his presence is the presence of God incarnate on earth. Isn't that an extraordinary thing? And John responded with joy to his presence. That's something we need to remember, isn't it, when we talk about stem cells.

When we talk about abortion, we talk about all of these things that are so easily dismissed as being of no consequence to human life today. And another thing, John began to fulfill his destiny before his birth and from his birth.

That's what the angel had said. And you see, in God's story, wonderful things like that can happen. It's not unique either, is it, in the Bible. There are others who are set apart in the womb and from their birth.

[16:43] That should make us think about our children too, shouldn't it? And our prayers for them. And God's hold upon them from infancy, even before infancy.

Of course, in one sense, John is unique, but in another sense, the Bible tells us very clearly he's not unique at all. Elizabeth and all the others in this story are set forth as examples of true faith. They are set forth by Luke as examples for us to emulate. We're told back in verse 6 of chapter 1 that they're righteous before God. They're walking blamelessly. These are godly people, people of real faith.

And Jesus himself tells us that even the least in his kingdom are greater than John the Baptist. So in just the same way, we can know, can't we, that God has his plan and his purpose for us and even for our children, even in the womb, even before they're born.

That means that we too can lay hold of God's covenant promises by faith just as they did. We can take God at his word and we can lead our own children into the destiny that God has for them.

[18:01] And John's parents are an example of that for us and Luke means us to see that. Zechariah had to be rebuked of course, but he took his rebuke and then he did at last, didn't he?

He laid hold upon the destiny of his son by naming him John as God had said. By doing that, he was grasping hold of God's promises for his child.

God's love. Well, that brings us to the second thing. We've had joy in the womb experienced by John, and now we're clearly told about joy in the woman, and that's something that's expressed by Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, verse 42, burst into song. She exclaimed with a loud cry. And it's a response to the leaping of John in her womb, which in turn is a response to the sound of Mary's greeting.

You read about people today, don't you, playing music and singing and reading to unborn children in the womb. This is clearly something quite beyond that.

[19:06] Mary's greeting surely can hardly be more than just a few words. She came into the house, maybe she blurted out, Elizabeth, I'm having a baby, an angel told me. I don't know what she said, maybe Zechariah in all these months of silence had managed to write down and get across to his wife Elizabeth all that the angel had told him.

Maybe Elizabeth had put it all together and had understood that. But surely John, a little baby still in the womb, couldn't have put it all together and understood it.

It's much simpler, isn't it, to just realize that something miraculous, something wonderful is happening here and overtaking everybody in this story. They don't understand it all fully.

I don't believe that for a minute. But the presence of the Lord in the midst simply changed everything for them. And somehow Elizabeth understands that the mother of her Lord has come to her.

And even John in the womb responds to the Lord that he himself has been born to serve and to make way for. And actually when you think about it, it often is like that, even in our own experience.

[20:24] Maybe that's true of some of you here this morning. Maybe you've come to church seeking something. You haven't quite known what. Perhaps you've been through one of our Christianity Explored courses. Maybe you've just been coming along on a Sunday morning and you don't quite understand it all.

You couldn't put it all together and just tell anybody exactly what it is that's happened. You can't understand or articulate it all yet. but you know that something extraordinary has happened to you. Something miraculous has happened to you. You just know that the Lord has come into your life. And that leads to expressions of joy. That's so often the way it is in people's lives.

We don't understand everything that's happened but we know that something real has come into our life. And that's what Luke is showing us here in the joy expressed by these women.

But notice the focus of their joy. Here's two women both newly pregnant. You've got so much in common there. Both of them extraordinary pregnancies. So much excitement and all that.

[21:29] You would have thought wouldn't you that their song would have been all about that. But it's not about that. Of course Elizabeth does recognize God's goodness to her and so on back in verses 24 and 25.

We read that. She gives thanks to God for everything that he's done. But here when Mary comes her joy is in a different dimension altogether. It's not just joy in her child. It's joy in another child. Verse 43. It's joy in her Lord who has come to her in Mary's womb. And she shares the joy of her own unborn son in the presence of Mary's son. The one whom she calls her own Lord. Lord. Now whether Zechariah had understood it all in his silent hours of pondering, whether he'd told Elizabeth, we just don't know. But clearly Elizabeth here grasped what Mary's conception meant. Verse 43. Her Lord has come to her. What she means is the Messiah King has come to me. [ 22 : 36 ] In Psalm 110, David speaks of the Messiah as his Lord. Jesus himself applies that explicitly to himself later on in Luke's Gospel.

David says, Yahweh, Jehovah, says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make all your enemies your footstool. He's speaking unequivocally about the Son of God, the great King who is to come. And Elizabeth's expressing her joy in precisely those biblical terms. And it shows that she understands. She understands that she's caught up in something vast, something eternal. She is caught up in God's ultimate plan for the whole world. That's what she's saying. And that's why her personal joy in her own domestic blessing of having a son in her old age, that's why it's overtaken by a much greater joy of what God is doing in his story. Her joy is in her privileged place in that story. That's always what marks out people of faith, isn't it? There are people whose horizons are filled with not just their own personal circumstances, not just how God fits into my life to bless me, however much he does, and of course he does. [ 24 : 03 ] But with people of real faith it's always the other way around, isn't it? They're taken up with God's story and what God is doing and how that is unfolding in the world.

That's what it means to be righteous before God, that's what it means to be walking blamelessly before him as verse 6 describes these people. It's the same as in chapter 2 verse 25 when we're told about Simeon who was devout and righteous, waiting for the consolation of Israel. In other words, these are people who are taken up with God's plan and purposes of salvation. These are gospel people, people who are looking for God's great intervention in the world. There's a hint of that I think back in verse 13 where the angel says to Zechariah, your prayer has been heard and your wife will bear a son. At first when you read that verse it looks rather like what Zechariah has been praying for the whole time is a son for his wife Elizabeth. But that can't be so, can it? Because in verse 18 it's very clear that that possibility wasn't even on Zechariah's radar screen. He didn't believe the angel when he said that. [ 25 : 18 ] Now Zechariah was there as the priest of Israel, chosen as the one person to offer prayers to God on behalf of the whole nation of Israel. And his prayer was prayer for God's salvation to come to his people.

His prayer was a longing for the redemption of Jerusalem, for the comfort of his people, a longing for God to answer his plan of salvation. And that's the prayer that the angel says is answered. Because God always answers prayers for his gospel to be fulfilled. God is not just that God has answered prayers for her own domestic situation, that God has come into her story, as it were. Now Elizabeth's joy is focused on the fact that she has somehow been taken up into God's marvelous story, into his saving story for the whole world. That's what explains her joy. [ 26 : 23 ] And not minimizing Elizabeth's joy at her own child. Of course she has joy in that. She thanks God for that. She rejoices in verse 25 that God has removed her reproach.

Childness in those days was a great reproach. Of course it's still a great sadness today, isn't it, to many? It's very real and very painful. But it was far, far worse then because it wasn't just the normal, natural pain of not having a child, it was a reproach. It brought stigma. It meant that you had no future, no destiny, no continuance of a family name. But you see, Elizabeth was a woman of true faith and she knew that real joy, she knew that lasting joy wasn't to be found just in a seed of her own, however natural her desire for a child would be. She knew that her hope was in the seed, in the promised seed. she knew that her real joy was in the Savior, in the Christ whom God had promised.

[ 27 : 30 ] And that is what we see her joy to be in here. Her Lord has come to her. And that's what opens her heart in such joy.

You see, friends, it's not really so very different today. There are all sorts of things that we long for in our own personal lives, aren't there? Sometimes it might be natural yearnings, just exactly like Elizabeth's, yearning for a baby, or yearning for a wife, to have a home and family, or a husband, or yearning for health itself, or all sorts of other things in life that are natural desires that we have, and things which do bring great joy, great satisfaction in life.

But, friends, true joy, although it is reflected in all of these things, true joy, lasting joy, solid joy, and lasting treasures, that's found only in the Lord himself coming to us, just as Jesus in the womb came to Elizabeth.

And you see, she knew that and understood that even then, and that is why she felt such joy and expressed it. But how?

How is that joy that she had really found? Well, that's the third thing that Luke wants us to see here. It's joy in the Word. There's joy, yes, experienced by John in the womb, there's joy expressed in song by the women, by Elizabeth, and also by Mary.

[ 29 : 19 ] But the joy that they have is explained by the Word, by the message about the Messiah who is coming. That's the road to joy for both of these women.

It was belief and trust in the promise of God coming to fulfillment at last. Verse 45, Elizabeth says Mary believed, she believed that God's Word would be fulfilled.

Quite a contrast, wasn't it, to Elizabeth's own husband. He didn't believe the Word that the angel said, didn't believe that it would be fulfilled in its time, and that led him to misery, to dumbness.

But Mary believed, and it led to great blessing and to great joy. And I guess verse 45 could equally apply to Elizabeth, couldn't it? Because she also believed, and she also welcomed the message of Mary with joy.

And so what Luke is telling us is the way to this joy from God is to have faith in God. It's belief and trust that God's Word is true. Belief and trust that all his promises will be fulfilled.

[ 30 : 30 ] That God keeps his promises of salvation. And Mary and Elizabeth both trusted him, and they found, in doing that, great joy, real personal joy.

And in doing so they discovered also that they were caught up in something wonderfully personal as well as something vast and cosmic and eternal. They had real personal unspeakable joy.

But the way to that joy was joy first of all in the Word, in the Word of God's promise. Grace. And Mary exemplifies one side of that real faith and trust that Luke wants us to understand.

When Mary heard the word from the angel, verse 38, she believed. She said, let it be to me according to your word. I am the servant of the Lord. In other words, she submitted God's truth. She bowed her knee to God. And that's faith, according to the Bible. Glad obedience to God's Word.

[ 31 : 44 ] Elizabeth, though, exhibits another side of the very same thing because she heard and believed with joy. In other words, she rejoiced in God's truth. And that also is real faith. And that's how the Bible describes faith to us.

It's a submission to God that rejoices. And it's a rejoicing that submits to God. And it was deeply personal for these women.

They rejoiced in the gospel message. They believed in the promise of God. And because they did, they were both caught up in something far, far greater for the rest of their lives.

They were lifted right up and beyond and out of their own little world of ordinary people living ordinary quiet lives. Their own personal stories, ordinary as they were, they became woven into God's story.

The story which is the story of all eternity. And they became part of that wonderful story which will never, ever end.

[ 32 : 52 ] Just plain ordinary people, people like you and me. But people were changed and transformed by that to have a destiny that goes on forever.

All because they rejoiced in the promise of God, because they rejoiced and received the good news of Jesus Christ. They had joy in the word, joy in the joyful message of Jesus.

And friends, 2,000 years have passed, but nothing has changed. Because that can still happen to ordinary people, people like you and me, people like Elizabeth and Mary and Zechariah and all the rest.

And that's why Luke wrote this down in his gospel. That's why it's been preserved for us. Because it's not just joy in the womb for John. It's not just joy for these women, Elizabeth and Mary, through their belief and trust in God's promises, their joy in God's word.

Now, this is for us also. This is for all the world. This is joy for the world. And it's just as wonderful today for us and for all the people of this world, although we're separated by 2,000 years of time.

[ 34 : 07 ] If you're a Christian believer, then Elizabeth's experience is yours also, just the same, just as good. In fact, it's better. because, as Paul says to the Ephesians, when you believed, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit to the praise of God's glory.

And you also can sing with the joy of the Spirit like Elizabeth. And you have everything that she had, but you have it even better because what she believed that God would fulfill all his promises has indeed been fulfilled.

As God raised the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, there has been a fulfillment of everything God promised. And therefore, that means that everything that God promised to them is ours today, and indeed for all eternity.

There is joy to the world. And that's the message of Christmas, that it's for us as well. That's why we sing, Good Christian men rejoice with heart and soul and voice, because the joy of Christmas is for every believer.

That's why Jesus says, even the least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist, because God kept his promises, and he still does.

[ 35 : 31 ] He fulfills everything that is spoken. But what about if you're not yet a Christian? What about if you're not a believer in God's promise?

What about you? Well, if it's joy to the world, then it must be joy offered to you as well, mustn't it? If you will hear the message, if you will join the joy.

It's still joy for the hearers, all the hearers. That is all who hear the message, all who believe it and trust in it with all their heart, all who express that faith and trust with songs of joy and praise, just as Elizabeth did and Mary.

Listen to what the apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 10. He says this, for with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

You see, just the same. Trust, belief in your heart, and joy on your lips. That's the way to the salvation that Jesus brings. And it's true for all.

[ 36 : 35 ] There is no distinction. He goes on to say this, for the scripture says everyone who believes in him will be saved. There is no distinction between Jew and Greek.

The same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing the riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Did you get that? All, everyone, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. God's way because he's the God of grace, the God of gratuitous mercy.

He came to Elizabeth, the first hearer, way back then, and she found everlasting joy. Joy in the Lord who fulfilled all his promises to her and all his promises for this world.

And he comes to us today just the same way, with the word of the good news of Jesus Christ. And faith that leads to joy still comes, just the same way, by hearing.

[ 37 : 46 ] So Luke is saying to us, friends, this morning as we read these words in the gospel that he's written for us, he's saying, be like these first hearers. Believe the promises of God and sing for joy.

joy. Verse 45 could read like this for us, blessed is everyone then and now who believe that there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken by the Lord.

And so Luke is telling us and urging us, join the joy. Join the joy this Christmas and share the joy because it really is a message of joy to the world.

Let's pray. Joy to the world. The Lord has come. Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room.

And heaven and nature sing. Lord, may we like Mary and Elizabeth and every other who has received the good news of Jesus Christ, may we believe and trust and so be led into a joy, joy which transcends even the deepest and darkest human pain and joy which is everlasting in the presence of our Savior.

[ 39 : 15 ] you. For we ask it in his name. Lord, may we see you.