

The Incarnation Part 4 - 'Mary and Elizabeth'

by Charles Alexander

This sermon explores the profound significance of the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, highlighting themes of prophecy, divine protection, and the transition from the old to the new covenant.

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:5, Luke 1:41-42, Luke 1:45, Galatians 4:19

Topics: "Incarnation Of Christ", "Divine Providence"

Description

Charles Alexander delves into the profound encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, highlighting the sanctity and prophetic nature of their conversation as they discussed the miraculous events surrounding the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. Mary's prompt visit to Elizabeth not only protected her reputation but also fulfilled divine purposes, ensuring she was shielded during the crucial months leading to the birth of Jesus. The sermon emphasizes the meticulous historical accuracy in Luke's account, showcasing God's providential hand guiding the events surrounding the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, ultimately leading to the fulfillment of prophecy and the ushering in of the new covenant.

Transcript

Luke 1:39-56: And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth.....And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.

I have always found in myself some feeling of delicacy about reading passages like this from the word of God, and from my earliest experience I have sought to avoid having to read them. I do not know why I should still feel this way in these days in which we live, when the processes of birth are shouted from the housetops, and not in a very holy or religious manner. You know to what I refer: in society, in the press and the media in general, even in our schools, including infant departments, not to mention the freedom practised in higher and further education.

There was a very proper and frank converse about these things in ancient times, when our forefathers lived nearer to nature than we do now; they had a very healthy outlook upon these mysterious matters. We nowhere find this more exemplified than in the converse which took place between these two women, Mary and Elizabeth, who have bequeathed not only of their wisdom and inspiration to all succeeding generations, but also their names.

We read in this passage of scripture what might be called some real women's talk. We men do not quite know what goes on when women talk about such things, especially two such women as Mary and Elizabeth. Oh! how sanctified was the nature of their conversation as they spoke of their experiences. We find that we are not in the region of delicacy at all, but rather in a region of deep sanctity and holiness. They are talking about the Lord, and the wondrous things which happened before John the Baptist was born. What was Mary doing there? She had received intimation, first of all, that her cousin Elizabeth was with child, and it was proper for Mary to go and visit her; but secondly, and more important, she had received a visitation from the same angel Gabriel who had been so active in the lives of Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias.

Mary was espoused to Joseph; that is, by law she was his wife, but the ceremony had not taken place; in keeping with eastern custom, they had not yet been formally wedded. As the Bible says, Mary and Joseph had not come together yet; but according to the customs quite proper at the time, they were married in the eyes of the law because they had been solemnly betrothed to that end. In the eyes of the Jewish law they were man and wife, though the final ceremony had not at that time taken place.

Such was the communication of the angel Gabriel to Mary, and such was her response, that she said (Luke 1:38), Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. Luke continues in the following verses: And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth.

Now why did Mary go there in such haste? She had to go then, at that precise time, for the preservation of her good name. She was there for three months, three vital months preceding the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ. It was in the beginning of those days that He was conceived by the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin; and in the shelter of the priest's house, in the company of those good people, Zacharias and Elizabeth, she was protected and shielded from the world. There was no possibility that she had been guilty of any wrongdoing because she was in the custody of a holy man and a holy woman during the significant time which mattered. That was why she was there; the Spirit of the Lord caused her to go. If anybody in the days after the birth of the Lord Jesus should ask questions, they would find she had been under the protection of two of the holiest people in Israel at that time, two people who looked for redemption. Her good name was safeguarded and no one could say anything about it; nor did anyone ever do so.

However, many people might have been mystified by the whole business. God therefore took additional means to protect her name and character, for he caused it to come about that the Roman authority should ordain that all the world should be taxed, and a censorship should be taken. It was decreed that everyone must be in the city to which they belonged at the time of the taxing. Here in chapter two we have one of the wonderful historical accounts of Luke, this consummate historian, who is notable for his accuracy and carefulness.

We have another example in the third chapter of Luke and the first two verses: Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. This fixes precisely when these things took place in the thirtieth year of John the Baptist's life, our Lord being six months younger.

To return to the birth of Christ, this same Luke says, as we have already seen, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, who was the nephew of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar was murdered by Brutus and Cassius, leaving no heir, and Mark Anthony and Julius Caesar's nephew Augustus made common cause together and established the Empire. Eventually Mark Anthony was eliminated and Augustus became Caesar and sole ruler.

It was during Augustus Caesar's reign that universal peace came upon the earth, which was needful in the providence of God, so that the gospel should be proclaimed and the kingdom of Christ be established. From the smallest beginning, a grain of mustard seed tumbling into the earth, becoming the greatest of all trees. The tree in the Bible is often synonymous with a kingdom. Peace was essential, and that was one of the most peaceful times in human history. For the first time in 100 years the Empire was at peace with itself. There were no civil wars (but for a brief hiatus in 69AD) until 180 AD and so this period has been called the Pax Romana. Therefore they could consolidate what they had done in peace. They built roads throughout the Empire so that the messengers of peace could travel with comparative ease and safety; but, more importantly, they ensured that the Gospel could be spread. It was safer for Paul to carry the Gospel throughout Europe and the Middle East in those days than it would be for us to travel there on a holiday ticket today.

And it came to pass in those days (Luke 2:1-2), that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. So Joseph went from Galilee with Mary to Bethlehem, because he did not belong to Galilee, although he lived and worked there. He was of the house and lineage of David, and the King of Israel could be born nowhere else but in Bethlehem. By this time Joseph and Mary had come together, but there had been nothing between them because the angel had also warned Joseph. When they arrived at Bethlehem, there was no room for them; the place was full up, because of the census and the taxing. There being no room at the inn, they went to the stable, and there He was born King of the Jews. These are familiar things to us, but it may be news to you that Luke fixed the time and the date of the birth of Christ. Historians have ascertained that it was correct, and they would have been able to fix the true date of our Lord's birth, which is about the year 3 or 4 B.C. Christ was born before the calendar date because some mistake was made in the calendar, not in Roman times but in subsequent times. When they fixed the Anno Domini calendar they departed from the Roman calendar; it was then that they got the date wrong. But Luke did not have the date wrong; he fixes the time to be during the reign of Caesar Augustus, when Cyrenius was the governor of Syria. That is mentioned because Galilee was where Joseph and Mary lived, and was in the region of the governorship of Cyrenius, under the government of Syria and not Jerusalem. Now if Luke were wrong he could be proved wrong, because the histories are open; but he was not wrong; he was right about all these historical notices in chapter three. It was in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, thirty years after the birth of Christ, when another Caesar was on the throne. He has it all correct, and historians have ascertained that Luke knew what he was writing about, and that he had access to the information. This historical background is included for this reason: to show that the hand of God is upon all history, but especially so about that time.

Because John the Baptist must be born at that time in such remarkable circumstances, and so that Mary should find refuge and shelter from all the shame and ignominy that might be pointed at her, as a consequence of the birth of the Lord, it was expedient that she should be removed from Galilee, the region to which she belonged, and return to Juda where she had spent those early months with her cousin Elizabeth. When Christ was born it was not in the presence of the friends and neighbours of the family in

Nazareth, who might say that there was something peculiar about this birth. It took place far from the women who would get together with their calendars and declare that there was something wrong. Mary was far removed from all this, and did not return to Galilee until two years later.

After the birth of Christ, Joseph and Mary fled with Him into Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod; it was only after their return that they went to Galilee, and by that time everything was over. Now these are just historic notices, but they have been mentioned in order to re-assure us that there is a case, a sound legal case, for the legitimacy of that birth which took place. Divine providence hedged everything around and safeguarded the participants in this mystical drama of birth. There is firmer confirmation for the people of God, which would not matter to the outside world; when Mary entered the house of Elizabeth and greeted her with a loving kiss, no doubt, and a warm salutation, something mysterious took place: the unborn child, who was to be John the Baptist, leapt in his mother's womb (Luke 1:41). Only Elizabeth could know about this significant movement within her body. What was this movement of the child? John the Baptist was three months old so far as the pre-birth process is concerned, and at the age of three months from the time of conception, he was praising God before he had been separated from his mother's womb. Let us consider something marvellous about this moment when Mary greeted her cousin Elizabeth; already the Saviour had been conceived by the Holy Spirit in her womb, and the still unborn John the Baptist responded by leaping in praise to the majesty of his Lord, despite His being an embryo just a few weeks old.

This took place because it was an assurance to Elizabeth and Mary, and a message to you and me. Notice that Elizabeth, "filled with the Holy Ghost," spoke with a loud voice (Luke 1:42-43) saying, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? She spoke out with a "loud voice"; that is, a prophetic voice! All those who are acquainted with the language of Holy Scripture know that this is the voice of prophecy loudly proclaiming from heaven something of supreme importance. Therefore Elizabeth was speaking by the Spirit of God, and she was saying remarkable things. She concludes her pronouncement (v45) by saying, Blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. In response, Mary declares, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. Elizabeth and Mary represent the old covenant, the covenant of Israel. The birth of John the Baptist heralded the passage of time, for he was the forerunner of the new covenant. He was to introduce the Saviour and say, "He must increase, and I must decrease." The new covenant (i.e. the new testament) would come in, and the old covenant, which John the Baptist represented, would fade away. Already, before he was born, his destiny was shown in the leap of joy which he gave, the movement which Elizabeth detected and spoke about to Mary. This was the salutation of the unborn baby to his God and Redeemer, of whom he was to be the herald and the forerunner.

There are many examples in the Bible of things which are decreed before birth. Paul speaks about God who separated me from my mother's womb and called me by His grace. God says to Jeremiah the prophet, Before I formed thee in the womb I knew thee, and ordained thee to be a prophet to the nations. We are dealing with God and Godlike things; the voice of Elizabeth was prophetic, and she was speaking on behalf of her son yet unborn. This was to be the manner of his life: to proclaim the advent of the true Redeemer, the hope of Israel, the end of the old and the beginning of the new. The new testament (the unborn child) is in the womb of the old testament (Elizabeth), and John unborn represents the joyful expectation of the old testament church, for the promise of redemption to be fulfilled. The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head, and sin and death, sorrow and shame, guilt and evil shall be

overwhelmed at the birth of this child, of whom John is the forerunner, the herald, the announcer. How marvellous!

If we understood our prophetic scriptures aright, we would see how the new testament is in the womb of the old testament, and that one comes forth from the other. And what shall we say about Mary, and the magnificat? This is a subject deserving of full and separate consideration, but it is worth noting here that Mary was speaking prophetically. We have all read the account of the birth of Samuel, and Hannah's rejoicing, so many centuries before, but are you aware that Mary's magnificat bears a close relationship to the words of Hannah's song? Mary was well acquainted with the scriptures, including, no doubt, Hannah's prophetic song about the birth of Samuel, and must often have wondered at it. At this time, the spirit of prophecy which was in Hannah was the same spirit of prophecy that was in Mary, and when compared the two songs have so much in common. The words must have been familiar, especially to the Israelite women, and highly influential. But who was speaking when Mary's soul magnified the Lord? There is a time when mother and child are one and indivisible, when one depends absolutely upon the other, and the life of the mother is the life of the child. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary's voice and the voice of Him so recently conceived in her womb were conjoined, as one, so that when Mary spoke, Christ spoke too; in the spirit of prophecy, mother and Son spoke in unity.

The true Church of Christ speaks with one voice, with His voice, because He and we are one through the atonement, the great reconciliation when God and man came together, and the seed of the woman became the source and fountain of new life: a new creation in which we are born again, miraculously, wonderfully, by the power of the same Holy Spirit. As a result of that, Christ is formed in us, and that is salvation!

Amen

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