

International Bible Lessons Commentary

Luke 1:39-56

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International Bible Lessons

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The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, December 11, 2016**, is from **Luke 1:39-56**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** discusses *Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further* to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. If you are a Bible student or teacher, you can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

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Luke 1:39-56

(Luke 1:39) Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah,

Immediately after the angel spoke to her, Mary set out to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah. The Bible does not tell us the birthplace of John the Baptist beyond the fact that he was born in a Judean town in hill country, which may have been near Jerusalem where Zechariah served as a priest or it may have been close to the wilderness where John began his ministry. Though Joseph and Mary raised Jesus in Nazareth, He too would be born in a Judean town, Bethlehem, the city of David.

(Luke 1:40) and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

Elizabeth would have been more than six months pregnant by the time Mary reached her. It seems that Mary probably stayed with Elizabeth until after the birth of John the Baptist, and perhaps a little longer to help her and the new baby boy. Her stay with Elizabeth for three months would have been both a spiritual and practical help to both of them, and Mary could learn from experience more about how to care for a newborn baby. She would also hear the prophecy of Zechariah about John and Jesus, when God

opened Zechariah's mouth and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. She would have many encouraging experiences and words to tell Joseph when she returned to her home.

(Luke 1:41) When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb: "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:15). John made his first prophecy before he was born when he leaped in his mother's womb when Elizabeth saw Mary, for the Holy Spirit within him confirmed by his leap that Mary was the mother of the Messiah. The Holy Spirit through Elizabeth revealed what his leap meant. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when she heard Mary's greeting, so she too prophesied regarding the baby Messiah that Mary carried within her. Though Mary believed the angel, she also received two witnesses that were filled with the Holy Spirit that confirmed what the angel Gabriel told her. One of these two witnesses was an unborn baby who was filled with the Holy Spirit and could testify to Elizabeth and Mary.

(Luke 1:42) And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"

Through Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit blessed the Messiah and His mother. Through Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit reaffirmed to Mary that God had fulfilled His promise to her; yes, she was pregnant with the Son of God. God would empower her to fulfill all the tasks ahead of her as the mother of Jesus and the wife of Joseph. God would be with her wherever she went. God would fulfill His covenant promise through her Son, who she now carried in her womb, and He would bless many. Mary was blessed to bear the Messiah that so many women had hoped to bear in fulfillment of prophecy.

(Luke 1:43) "And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me?"

As many Jews might have expected, Jesus did not "earn" His title of Messiah by His works or by defeating His enemies or by destroying the enemies of Israel. Jesus was the Messiah, the King of the Jews, before the moment of His conception and birth, as the wise men would later testify (Matthew 2:1-12). Even in Mary's womb, Jesus was the Messiah and Lord of Elizabeth, and through the Holy Spirit she acknowledged this fact. Jesus was the Lord over all before He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb. He was the Word made flesh; He came and dwelt among us: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . .And the Word became

flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1 and 1:14). Jesus is the incarnate God and Elizabeth praised Jesus as her Lord even before He was born as the physical baby, Jesus. We acknowledge this truth when we sing the hymn *Silent Night* and proclaim: "Jesus, Lord at thy birth."

(Luke 1:44) "For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy."

The Holy Spirit explained through Elizabeth why she had greeted Mary with such extravagant praise. The child within her, John the Baptist, had leaped with joy. She also knew that the words she spoke had been given to her by God as a way of explanation and revelation. She had not deducted them from merely seeing her relative (who probably would not have shown physically at that time that she was pregnant). These events and words were further testimony to help Mary and Joseph; words that also help all those reading the Bible to understand the divine and human nature and origin of Jesus.

(Luke 1:45) "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

Unlike her husband, Zechariah, Elizabeth confirmed that Mary had believed the angel Gabriel from the first moment without asking for a sign. Elizabeth probably went on to explain what she meant by her comment. The angel told Zechariah, "But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur" (Luke 1:20). Mary would also be present after John was born; therefore, she would hear Zechariah speak for the first time after the angel Gabriel had spoken to him (Luke 1:62-64). Luke might have learned this information directly from Mary or from one of the documents he consulted when he wrote his gospel (see Luke 1:1-4). Elizabeth confirmed that the angel Gabriel had spoken to Mary the words that the Lord wanted spoken. Mary had believed that the Lord's words would be fulfilled by the Lord. Then, through the Holy Spirit, the One who protected and overshadowed her, the Lord became incarnate in Mary's womb, and she would give birth to Jesus the Messiah after she and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem.

(Luke 1:46) And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord,

After Mary and Elizabeth met, the Holy Spirit inspired Mary to offer this song of praise. Some traditionally have called this song "The Magnificat": Latin for "magnifies" and the "Canticle of Mary". The Holy Spirit gave Mary an enlarged view of God and His loving purposes; therefore, her soul (or her mental abilities and powers) now had a greater or

larger understanding of how magnificent the true God is. Now, she wanted to share her greater knowledge of the Lord with Elizabeth. To magnify an object with a microscope or a telescope does not change the object we enlarge with the lens in the instrument. When we “enlarge” an object visually, we can see it better and understand more about it, and we can then teach others what we have learned. When Mary magnified the Lord, she did so because God had enlarged her understanding of the Lord; so, she could now help others learn more about the Lord through her words that magnified the Lord. Her words in no way changed or distorted the true nature and character of God; rather, her words revealed that God had given her a better understanding of the true God and His purposes. She saw God in greater detail, and she shared those details with Elizabeth.

(Luke 1:47) And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

Mary bowed before God as her Lord when she received the angel’s message. She rejoiced in God because she knew she needed a Savior from sin too (though some churches teach that Mary never sinned throughout her entire life). Though Mary lived right and could be considered righteous, she knew she was not sinless or morally perfect; therefore, she knew needed a Savior (and the Holy Spirit revealed this fact through her song). She would always need God the Father and God’s Son, Jesus the Messiah, to be her Savior. God also saved her from disgrace and poverty (after the angel told Joseph that Jesus had been conceived by the Holy Spirit). In the beginning, Mary probably had the traditional understanding that the Messiah would save her and her people from the slavery of their Roman oppressors, but the Holy Spirit over time revealed more than this through Jesus’ ministry and the Bible. Mentally, Mary understood some new truths and part of the future that God planned for His people through her Son. She understood better than she had ever understood before, because of the direct revelation to her from the angel and the miraculous conception of Jesus in her womb through the work of the Holy Spirit; therefore, her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior. Her spirit was the point of contact between herself and the Spirit of God. The Apostle Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16). Mary’s spirit rejoiced because the Spirit of God had revealed to her that she needed a Savior, that God was her Savior, and that she would give birth to the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Created in the image of God and as a child of God spiritually, Mary would physically give birth to the only begotten Son of God. Through faith in Jesus, many would be adopted into God’s family.

(Luke 1:48) “For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

Mary was humble. She was not from a wealthy family. She lived in a small town, Nazareth, in Galilee (an area many Jews despised). She acknowledged that even though she was of low estate (humble) that God had treated her with divine favor by choosing her to give birth to God's only Son, Jesus the Messiah. Mary declared with humility that she did not know of any personal qualities she had as reasons for God selecting her to serve Him. God had His own reasons for selecting her to perform a once in a lifetime task in the world and to bear His only begotten Son. God had prepared her and selected her for reasons of His own. She also spoke a prophecy about herself and how she would be regarded in the future. God selected her and revealed to her that everyone from that time forward would call her blessed. Her statement was a prophecy that God inspired her to share, and her fulfilled prophecy is a fact that we can verify more than 2000 years later — God fulfilled His word through her in many ways: facts we can share with others.

(Luke 1:49) “For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name.

Mary called God her Lord and Savior; the expression of her faith and desire to obey God. She serves as an example for everyone, and upon reflection all believers can say, “The Mighty One has done great things for me”. She recognized the Lord as the Mighty One, and humbly praised God in total amazement that He had done many great things for her. Through the gift of Jesus Christ, God has done great things for multitudes of people around the world. She affirmed what the Bible teaches about God; that God is holy and what God does is holy, pure, right, just, and loving. God always expresses His love with holiness and purity. At this point in Mary's praise of God, the “Mighty One” is an appropriate name or title for God. God had done for her what had never been done before, and God had done so in holiness. “Holy is His name” describes the essential reality of God's character; so, the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in Mary's womb and Jesus was a holy child of God. Jesus was not conceived as the lustful and capricious Greek and Roman “gods” of mythology or modern fiction supposedly conceived children that were half god and half human. Love and holiness are the heart and foundation of God's character and behavior. God always does what is morally right, and God did not violate His moral law in the conception of Jesus. Unlike mythological idols, Jesus is fully God and fully man, NOT half god and half man.

(Luke 1:50) “AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM.

Even generations after His birth, through faith in Jesus the Messiah, who was born of the virgin Mary, we can receive mercy, forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. Mary

knew that she did not deserve God's selection of her to be the mother of the Messiah. Rather, she believed and the Holy Spirit inspired her to declare that her selection was the result of our Holy God extending grace and mercy to her and to every person who fears or has reverence for God in their hearts. Respect for God (and sometimes a fear of the consequences of disobeying God) has led many to seek God's forgiveness and mercy as their Savior. From the beginning, God has shown special mercy to those who respect Him as their holy God and Jesus as their God and Savior (see Titus 2:13).

(Luke 1:51) “He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.

The Holy Spirit inspired Mary to proclaim what God has done in the past and will do in the future. God, who created all things by the Word, has the strength to do whatever He needs to do. Mary praised some of the qualities of God that God had demonstrated in the past from generation to generation. God had shown His strength in the Israelites' exodus from Egypt through the leadership of His prophet Moses. God had shown His strength through King David, the king after God's own heart (who wanted to know God's will so he could do God's will). God had shattered the proud as they sought to conquer or enslave others; such as, Pharaoh in Egypt or King Ahab and Jezebel in Israel. Mary foretold that Jesus would show the strength of God in defeating God's enemies. Jesus cast out demons and led some of the enemies of God to salvation; such as, the Apostle Paul. God's Son would scatter the proud, whose actions would demonstrate their true thoughts (such as the true thoughts of the religious leaders who crucified Jesus). Jesus will show the world the strength of God's arm when He comes again as Lord of lords and King of kings (see Revelation 17:14 and Revelation 19:16).

(Luke 1:52) “He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble.

Mary knew that God could bring down the powerful, even the most powerful of nations. She knew the history of God's victories over Israel's enemies. She also knew about some of the nations around Judea (and even Judea) that had fallen to the mighty Roman armies. She also knew that the Messiah, the King of Israel, would lift up the lowly or humble. She trusted that even though she was a person of lowly instead of royal birth that God could raise up her Son as the Ruler over all nations. She believed that her Son would be the Ruler of His people and the Conqueror of the enemies of her people. Mary knew from the defeat of Pharaoh in the day of Moses, and from the taking possession of the Promised Land by Joshua, that God had defeated many powerful pagan kings and met the needs of His people. Jesus lifted up the lowly fisherman and tax collector to be

His disciples and apostles, and He healed the leper and raised the dead. Someday, every world leader will bow before Him. Some of God's leaders in the past had brought down the powerful from their thrones (King David defeated many enemies of God's people). Some had lifted up the lowly; such as Elijah when he helped the widow at Zarephath (see 1 Kings 17). As a few others had done before Him, the Messiah who would soon be born would bring down the powerful from their thrones who in their pride defied or disregarded God, God's laws, and God's will for His people. The lowly would be blessed and made happy as they opened their hearts to receive His grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love. Jesus the Messiah would lift up the lowly to serve God; people who had once fished for fish would learn to fish for people. Despised sinners would be transformed and become the Messiah's disciples.

(Luke 1:53) "HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; And sent away the rich empty-handed.

Jesus preached and filled the crowds with good teachings and truth as He spoke with an authority unlike any they had heard. He filled some of the crowds with fish and bread after He had taught them, for His teaching was more important than physical food and was given to those who valued His teaching so much they stayed to listen to Him for long hours and days at a time. Jesus said it was hard, but not impossible, for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, and during His ministry most of the rich and powerful ignored Him (until they killed Him). As Mary foretold the future of the Messiah, she did so with the certainty that the future was already being accomplished according to the Scriptures by Jesus; such was the faith that the Holy Spirit inspired within her to confess.

(Luke 1:54) "He has given help to Israel His servant, In remembrance of His mercy,

Mary recognized the proper relationship between God and Israel, and the promises God had made to her people. He was the Lord of the whole community of Israel, and Israel was His servant. She acknowledged that Israel had sinned against the Lord as a nation many times, and that as His servant they did not deserve or merit His care; however, God is a God of mercy as well as justice and holiness; therefore, God sent the merciful Messiah to save them. God had made a covenant promise with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God remembered that promise when in mercy God led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. He led them out, not because they deserved to be freed from slavery, but because of His mercy and His past promises. God remembered His mercy from generation to generation as He worked through judges, kings, and prophets

to save His people from various forms of slavery or sin. Now, in remembrance of His mercy, God would help Israel again through the Messiah that the Holy Spirit had conceived within Mary. Jesus would be their Savior, and the Savior of the world.

(Luke 1:55) As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his descendants forever.”

God sent Jesus into the world, not because we deserve His being sent by God, but because God made a promise to Abraham and his descendants forever, and this promise relates to our needing a Savior. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary’s song traced the conception of Jesus in her womb to the promise of God that the whole world would be blessed by Jesus, by the Seed who would bring the blessing of salvation from sin and the gift of eternal life. God had promised that all the nations of the world would be blessed by the descendants of Abraham. His mercy was not limited to the nations of Israel or Judah. God called the descendants of Abraham to share God’s mercy with all people everywhere, but where they failed God would succeed through Abraham’s descendant, Jesus. Jesus, the Messiah and Savior and a descendant of Abraham, came to extend the offer of God’s mercy and forgiveness with all people – through repentance and faith in Jesus anyone can be saved from their sins and inherit everlasting life.

(Luke 1:56) And Mary stayed with her about three months, and then returned to her home.

Luke concluded Mary’s words with the note that she probably remained with Elizabeth until John the Baptist was born. Carrying the baby Jesus within her womb, Mary went back to her own home because she was not yet married to Joseph – only pledged to be married to Joseph. Her report to Joseph about her visit to Elizabeth and John’s birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age would encourage them both: God was with them as they agreed to share life together as the parents of Jesus. If Mary went to see Elizabeth immediately, she arrived before John was born and she probably left after his birth. Thus, as a virgin, she would have learned about the birth and care of a newborn baby. God’s timing and care for us are always perfect to the smallest detail.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. What truths in Luke 1:46-56 have been magnified for you as you have studied this lesson so you understand these truths of God better?

2. When someone first realizes that God is their Savior through Jesus, what new reasons do they have for rejoicing in God?
3. When someone has followed Jesus as their Lord and Savior for a long time, what additional reasons might they have from experience for rejoicing in God?
4. What type of person does Mary say God will be merciful toward?
5. What are some of the actions God will take to help those He will be merciful toward?

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