

December 11

Lesson 2

# THE AFFIRMATION

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## OF THE PROMISE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 111

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 1:39-56

### LUKE 1:39-56

<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors."

<sup>56</sup> Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

### KEY VERSES

Mary said, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."—**Luke 1:46, 47**

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify Old Testament themes in Mary’s Song (“Magnificat”).
2. Explain how themes in Mary’s song inform the Christian understanding of God’s providential care.
3. Share with a classmate personal experiences of unexpected blessing.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

- A. The Joy of Being Chosen
- B. Lesson Background

### I. Mary’s Visit (Luke 1:39-45)

- A. Hasty Trip (vv. 39, 40)
- B. Exuberant Reactions (vv. 41-45)

### II. Mary’s Song (Luke 1:46-55)

- A. Joy and Blessing (vv. 46-49)
  - The God Who Confirms*
  - Fifteen Minutes of Fame*
- B. Mercy and Retribution (vv. 50-55)

### III. Mary’s Return (Luke 1:56)

### Conclusion

- A. Ordinary People
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. The Joy of Being Chosen

Nothing feels better than being chosen. The childhood joy of receiving an invitation to a party is unforgettable. Being asked on a date (or getting a *yes* when doing the asking) builds self-esteem. Being offered a job, especially after we’ve lost one, enhances self-confidence. The good feeling that results from such situations may stem from a sense of deserving or having earned the choosing.

On the other hand, things that are unearned can be difficult to receive. We easily imagine Mary to have felt this way after being told that she was God’s choice to bear his Son (Luke 1:26-38, last week’s lesson). All of us feel awed at times by the depth of God’s grace. But to be chosen for no apparent reason to be the earthly mother of the Christ—how overwhelming, especially considering that Mary was likely still a teenager at the time! Today’s lesson gives us a glimpse into Mary’s joy at being chosen to fill this marvelous role.

### B. Lesson Background

Last week’s lesson reviewed Gabriel’s announcement that Mary was to give birth to the Messiah. Since that announcement forms the immediate background for the lesson at hand, that information need not be repeated here. But against the broader backdrop of salvation-history, the unexpected, miraculous pregnancies of Mary and Elizabeth meant that the two women stood at the very threshold of prophetic fulfillment.

Neither one knew the details of how God would use their unborn sons to fulfill the promises in Luke 1:16, 17, 32, 33. Even so, it is almost certain that at least elderly Elizabeth, wife of a priest, was aware of past incidents of miraculous, old-age pregnancies like hers; such awareness would have undergirded her faith for the days ahead (Genesis 17:19; 25:21; Judges 13:3-5; 1 Samuel 1:5, 20).

The much younger Mary, for her part, may have been aware that her unprecedented virginal conception was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. Further, her declarations in this week’s lesson, traditionally referred to as “Mary’s Song,” reflect Old Testament passages that praise God for caring for the helpless. For example, scholars often observe that the imagery of Luke 1:46-55 is very similar to that of 1 Samuel 2:1-10, the prayer of Hannah. She, like Mary’s relative Elizabeth, had been unable to conceive (1 Samuel 1:2, 5; Luke 1:7), but each was miraculously blessed to bear a son (1 Samuel 1:20; Luke 1:24). Mary and Elizabeth had good reason to celebrate God’s faithfulness as the saints before them had.

## I. Mary’s Visit

(LUKE 1:39-45)

### A. Hasty Trip (vv. 39, 40)

**39. At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,**

Mary lives in “Nazareth, a town in Galilee” (Luke 1:26), while Elizabeth and Zechariah (a priest, 1:5) live in an unnamed *town ... of Judea*. The two villages are located in different areas that later will have different rulers (Matthew 2:22; Luke 3:1), but for now Herod the Great rules both. Hilly Judea is the district that includes Jerusalem.

Most priests do not live in Jerusalem. Instead, they live on property inherited through ancestral lineage (compare Nehemiah 11:20). They serve in Jerusalem on occasion, according to a system of casting lots (Luke 1:8, 9; next week’s lesson). Rural priests, as Zechariah seems to be, work on farms as most people do in preindustrial economies.

Mary *got ready and hurried* to visit Elizabeth. Some speculate the haste is from a sense of duty to assist an expectant mother with household chores. This could be especially so given that Elizabeth, “very old” as she is, is now in the sixth month of her pregnancy (Luke 1:7, 36). The better answer is that Mary’s trip is in reaction to what we might call “the sign element” in Gabriel’s announcement (1:36). Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy will be a sign—although the text does not use that word—to Mary, and she wishes to confirm it without delay (compare 2:12, 15, 16).

## HOW TO SAY IT

Bethlehem *Beth-lih-hem.*

Gabriel *Gay-bree-ul.*

Judah *Joo-duh.*

Judea *Joo-dee-uh.*

Magnificat *Mag-nif-ih-cot.*

Nazareth *Naz-uh-reth.*

Zechariah *Zack-uh-rye-uh.*

### *What Do You Think?*

How can we do better at knowing when haste is called for versus the opposite?

### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In normal, day-to-day routines

In dealing with a crisis

When considering a ministry opportunity

Comparing and contrasting Proverbs 19:2; 21:5; 29:20; Ecclesiastes 5:2; 7:9; 8:3; Matthew 5:25; 28:8; Luke 2:16; Acts 22:18; 1 Timothy 5:22; and James 1:19

**40. where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.**

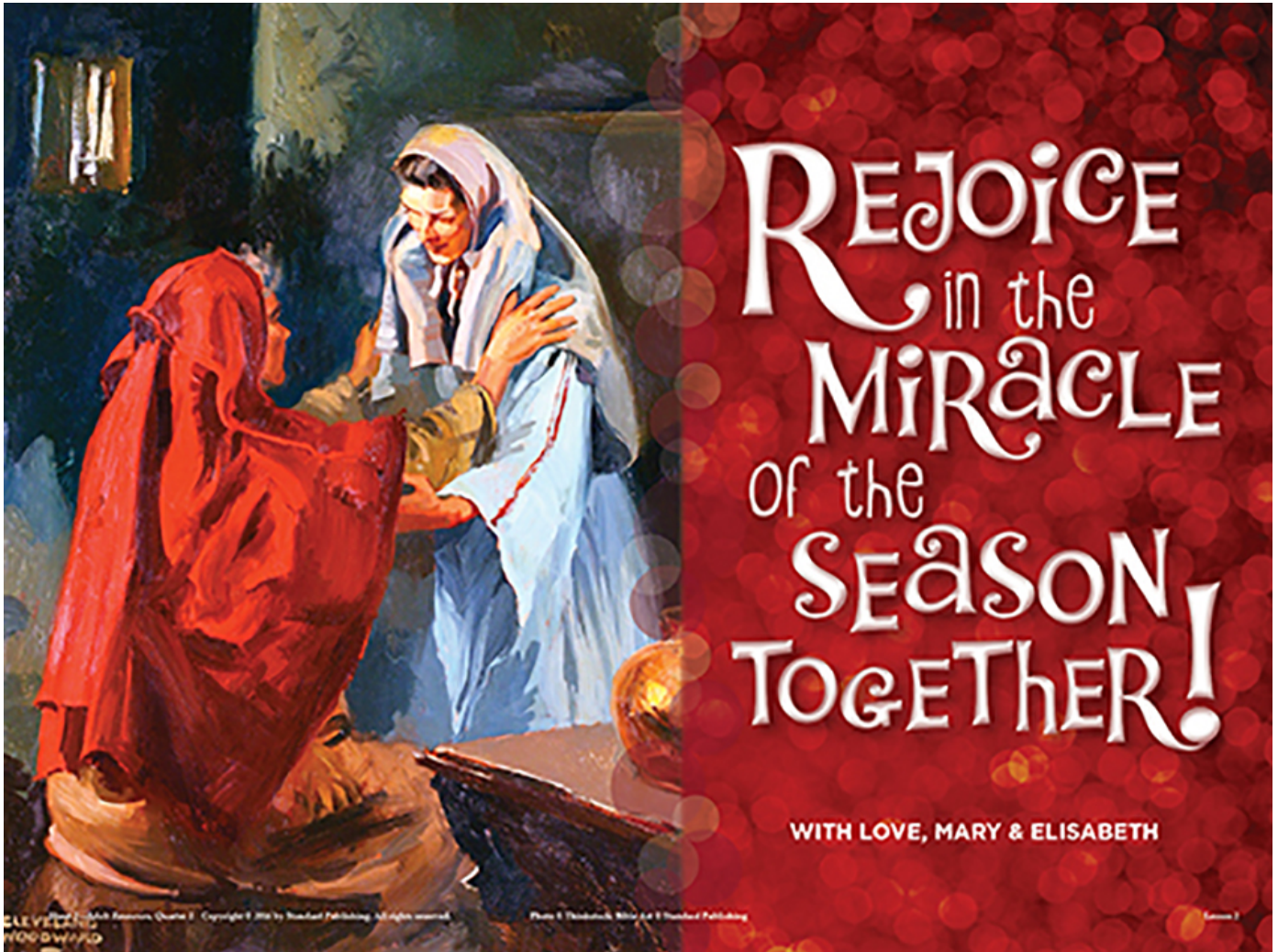
The trip must be exhausting for Mary. The minimum distance for the trip is 35 miles, assuming that *Zechariah’s home* is at the northernmost tip of Judean territory. But Luke makes no mention either of distance or exhaustion. Instead, he focuses on the interactions of those present.

On entering the house, Mary begins a normal exchange of greetings with Elizabeth; the verb translated *greeted* also is translated elsewhere in terms of greeting (Romans 16:3-11; etc.).

## B. Exuberant Reactions (vv. 41-45)

**41. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.**

Mary’s arrival provokes a startling response! There is nothing inherently unusual about a baby moving about in the womb, of course. But the timing of that reaction is significant in view of the relationship that later emerges between Jesus (Mary’s child) and John the Baptist (Elizabeth’s child). The latter is “*filled with the Holy Spirit* even before he is born” as empowerment “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:15-17; see next week’s lesson). Even before his birth, John begins to fulfill his role by signaling to his mother that the anticipated Christ, himself yet unborn, is present. At the same time, Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit to confirm the message Mary has received from the angel (next verse).



**Visual for Lesson 2.** Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask learners how they will do this and why it is important.

**42. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!”**

The word *blessed* occurs four times in today’s text: twice here and once each in [verses 45](#) and [48b](#). However, different Greek words are behind these translations.

The word behind the two translations *blessed* here in [verse 42](#) is also our English word *eulogy*. As we use that word today, we refer to statements spoken or written in honor of someone who has died. But we should not take the modern way we use this word and “read it back” into the Bible! There it means “to speak well of,” “to praise,” “to celebrate with praises,” or “to extol” someone, but not just at funerals. Elizabeth is speaking well of Mary while the latter is still very much alive!

In view of the significance attached to this verse in some religious circles, it is important to point out that these two pronouncements do not say why Mary is blessed. That will wait until we encounter different uses of *blessed* in [verses 45](#) and [48](#), below.

**43. “But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”**

Elizabeth is surprised and honored to see her younger relative. In turn, Mary must be very surprised to hear Elizabeth’s knowledge of something that Mary herself has only recently learned from an angel! Mary is not visibly pregnant at this time (see [1:26](#), [35](#), [36](#), [39](#)), and time factors make it extremely doubtful that Elizabeth has been informed by any normal mode of communication that Mary has conceived. The greatest likelihood is that Elizabeth has been informed supernaturally by being “filled with the Holy Spirit” ([v. 41](#), above).

**44. “As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”**

This verse repeats information of [verse 41](#), above, and adds *for joy*. John the Baptist’s prenatal reaction seems somehow to reflect his own sense of anticipation of the coming of the one who will give meaning to John’s mission.

45. **“Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”**

The word translated *blessed* here and in [verse 48b](#) is the one Jesus will later use in the Beatitudes ([Matthew 5:3-11](#)). This word has a range of meanings of something like “enjoying favorable circumstances,” “well off,” “happy,” and/or “fortunate.” Use of this word normally includes a reason or explanation for someone to be regarded as blessed.

We see such a reason here in the phrase *that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!* That’s why Mary is blessed. She is not said to be blessed because she is particularly outstanding or worthy of merit (see more on [v. 48](#), below).

Elizabeth’s declarations provide a transition to Mary’s Song that follows by highlighting two themes: (1) God’s blessings are for the faithful, and (2) God fulfills his promises.

## II. Mary’s Song

(LUKE 1:46-55)

### A. Joy and Blessing (vv. 46-49)

46, 47. **And Mary said:**

**“My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**

The praise Mary expresses reveals that she views Elizabeth’s blessing as a confirmation of Gabriel’s message of [Luke 1:35](#). If Mary has wondered whether her encounter with the angel were merely a hallucination, her elderly relative’s awareness is verification of fact. The terms *rejoices* and *God my Savior* anchor major themes of what follows.

#### *THE GOD WHO CONFIRMS*

When the characters in a science-fiction story encounter things typically thought of as unreal, which violate the laws of physics, etc., the writer must find ways to make such things believable to both the characters and the readers. The writer’s task is to help suspend disbelief.

But how can you help people believe that the impossible just happened? How can they be assured that they are not hallucinating or otherwise losing their faculties? The more outlandish the literary scenario, the more the author must work to create a realistic response from the characters and thereby keep the reader engaged.

The Bible is not fiction, but its characters are confronted with things outside mind-sets formed by life experiences. Consider the angelic communication to Mary of last week’s lesson. This visit carried the risk that she would be left tragically confused—*Did I hallucinate? Am I losing my mind?*—until the passage of weeks and months proved the physical reality of her pregnancy. (Compare Peter’s mistaken impression in [Acts 12:9-11](#).) How gracious of God to provide Mary the confirmation we see in today’s text!

We serve a God who confirms his Word and his calls ([Romans 15:8](#); [1 Corinthians 1:5, 6](#); etc.). He does not leave us uncertain. For this may we be filled with the joy of the Lord!—V. E.

*What Do You Think?*

How do you expect God to confirm callings on your life? What if those sources conflict?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- The role of Scripture
- The role of counsel by fellow Christians
- How we expect God to answer prayer
- Open and closed doors of opportunity

48a. **“for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.**

This is the reason for the praise expressed in [verse 47](#). Clearly, Mary is not chosen for her special role because she is a special person—quite the opposite! The fact that she is of *humble state* is critical to Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth: God’s Son came from and for such as these (compare [Luke 2:8-20](#); [1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5](#)).

48b. **“From now on all generations will call me blessed,**

This prediction we now know to be a matter of established historical fact, and Mary’s fame throughout the world and over millennia (*all generations*) is indeed remarkable. Yet if not handled carefully, the prominence of this fact in the history of Christian doctrine may distract from its true significance. [Verse 49](#) (next) clarifies.

### *FIFTEEN MINUTES OF FAME*

In a world with more than seven billion people, attempts to distinguish oneself can be daunting. Even so, the existence of video-sharing websites, televised talent competitions, and so-called reality TV have kept alive the concept of “15 minutes of fame,” an expression traceable to the late 1960s. Fame seems to be something many people would like to achieve.

Fame, whether fleeting or lasting, can bring benefits. A famous person may get special treatment. He or she may even get a platform to influence the world in a positive way. But when God singles out someone for his kind of fame, that person’s legacy ends up being eternally significant (see [Hebrews 11](#)). Mary was correct in noting that all generations would call her blessed. Selected by God from obscurity, Mary is remembered by Christians every Christmas season for her faithfulness.

Most of us will live our earthly lives in obscurity, as the world defines that concept. But God sees our actions and knows the motives behind them. Loving obedience pleases him ([2 John 6](#)); humility results in his grace ([1 Peter 5:5](#)). While we may never receive an exalted title, be elected to high office, or be offered an invitation to host a TV show, God makes note of those who serve him faithfully. They are the ones to be called blessed forever. See [Revelation 20:6](#); [22:14](#).—V. E.

**49. “for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.**

As in [verse 45](#) (above), a reason or explanation is given for why Mary is to be considered blessed. We should note carefully that the focus is on God, not on Mary. God is the one who does *great things* to her, not the reverse. God is the one whose *name* is *holy* ([Psalm 103:1](#); [105:3](#); etc.). Despite her lowly status—or perhaps because of it—the mighty Creator of the universe sees fit to include her in his plans. Hannah’s prayer in [1 Samuel 2:1-10](#) is parallel in also affirming God’s power and holiness at the outset (see the Lesson Background).

*What Do You Think?*

Is it possible to overstate God’s role in circumstances that change? Why, or why not?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Regarding circumstances of blessing

Regarding circumstances of distress

Considering [Ecclesiastes 9:11](#)

### **B. Mercy and Retribution (vv. 50-55)**

**50. “His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.**

Many psalms connect God’s mercy and/or love with *those who fear him* (see [Psalms 33:18](#); [103:11](#), [17](#); [118:4](#); [147:11](#)). Mary’s point is not that God is never merciful to those who do not fear him, but rather that he is always merciful to those who do—regardless of their circumstances.

*What Do You Think?*

How do we know when we fear the Lord properly? How do we correct problems here?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In attitudes about ourselves

In interacting with the secular world in general

In attitudes toward and interactions with others in particular

In personal habits and disciplines

Other

**51. “He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.**

The imagery of God’s *arm* as an indication of his might or power is a vivid Old Testament theme ([Psalm 89:10](#), [13](#); [Isaiah 40:10](#); [Jeremiah 21:5](#); etc.). *Those who are proud* refers not so much to those who merely think too highly of themselves (which, of course, is not good; see [Romans 12:3](#)), but more to those who actively oppose God and intend harm for his people ([Psalm 94:1-6](#); [123:3](#), [4](#)). Those controlled by *their inmost thoughts* do not allow God’s Word to direct their behavior ([Ezekiel 13:1-3](#), [17](#); [Romans 1:21-23](#)).

Old Testament references to God’s might or strength are often accompanied by accounts of what he has done to deliver his people from proud schemers ([Exodus 15:1-18](#); etc.). Such passages highlight Israel’s lowly state and unworthiness in order to emphasize God’s graciousness and power—he overcomes enemies that his people cannot. The verse before us connects Mary’s personal experiences with great acts of past

deliverance: God exalts the faithful regardless of their status otherwise. He is once again choosing the lowly (Mary) to fill an important role in his plan.

52. **“He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.**

Mary’s summarizes much of Israel’s history: God exalted *the humble* ([Genesis 41:41](#); [Psalms 78:70, 71; 113:7, 8](#); etc.) while dethroning *rulers* ([Job 12:19](#); [Isaiah 10:12-19](#); [Jeremiah 28:15-17](#); etc.). The latter theme is especially prominent in terms of foreign powers that oppressed or conspired to destroy Israel. God laughs at such schemes ([Psalm 2:1-4](#)).

Mary’s statements also anticipate Jesus’ later teachings regarding position reversals of the powerful and the weak ([Luke 14:7-11](#); [18:9-14](#); etc.). He himself will be the ultimate example, as Mary and others will find out ([Acts 2:32, 33](#); [2 Corinthians 8:9](#); [Philippians 2:5-11](#)).

53. **“He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.**

This verse parallels the language of Hannah’s prayer at [1 Samuel 2:5](#). *The rich* is usually a derogatory term for those who gain wealth by exploiting the innocent ([Proverbs 22:7](#); [James 2:6, 7](#); etc.). Although wealthy landowners and officials manipulate the economy and the justice system to their advantage ([Ezekiel 22:27-29](#); [Amos 5:11, 12](#); etc.), God can’t be bought. He blesses those who are faithful, and Mary seems to be identifying herself with *the hungry* whom God fills *with good things*. God certainly did not choose the richest woman in the world (as the world counts being rich) to be the earthly mother of Jesus!

54. **“He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful**

Mary’s words again echo an Old Testament theme of deliverance (compare [Psalm 98:3](#); [Isaiah 41:8-10](#)). Various psalms and prophecies express desire for and prediction of God’s deliverance of Israel from dire threats (example: [Psalm 79](#)). These were traceable to apostasy ([2 Chronicles 6:36-39](#)).

More narrowly, this verse may also focus on Mary’s own experience. God had promised to deliver his people through the coming of a certain servant ([Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#); etc.), and Mary recognizes her role in God’s fulfillment of that promise. Surely all this is taking place because he is *remembering to be merciful!* God is doing what he said he would do (compare [2 Samuel 7:16](#); [Isaiah 7:14](#)).

55. **“to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”**

Deliverance validates God’s promises to Mary’s *ancestors*, who include *Abraham and his descendants*. God’s people are protected if they remain, or return to being, faithful (example: [Genesis 17:7](#); [Psalm 105:42-45](#)). Mary connects those promises with her child, but more than 30 years will elapse before she knows all the details. The promises and details are ours as well, since “those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” ([Galatians 3:9](#)).

### III. Mary’s Return

([LUKE 1:56](#))

56. **Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.**

The fact that six months ([Luke 1:36](#)) plus *three months* equals nine months could indicate that Mary stays until John is born. But [verse 57](#) offers evidence that Mary departs just prior to the birth. Nazareth, the location of her *home*, will be the point of departure for Bethlehem, where Mary’s child will be born ([2:1-5](#)).

*What Do You Think?*

What has to happen for you to realize that God is changing your plans? Why?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Regarding situations that call for action that you had not planned to take

Regarding situations that call for inaction when you had planned otherwise

## Conclusion

### A. Ordinary People

In 1984, Helen Ashe of Knoxville, Tennessee, saw a local news story about a church that sponsored a soup kitchen for the needy. Her heart was stirred, and she and her twin sister, Ellen, sensed a call to start a food ministry to “help feed God’s children.” So on Valentine’s Day 1986, the 58-year-old sisters launched The Love Kitchen at a small church, serving 22 people on that first day.

The Love Kitchen today operates out of its own facilities as it serves more than 3,000 meals weekly. Remarkably, it is an all-volunteer organization, with no paid staff.

God still calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things. At age 80, Moses was called from self-imposed exile to lead the Israelites from Egypt ([Exodus 3:10; 7:7](#)); elderly Elizabeth suffered the disgrace of infertility ([Luke 1:7, 13-25](#)); Mary and Joseph probably had no earthly status above that of any other working-class resident of Galilee. The church today is filled with people who should identify with Mary's statement that "he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." Do you?

### B. Prayer

Father, help us recognize occasions when you call us to participate in your plan. May you strengthen us as we do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

God uses people we might not expect in ways we might not imagine.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

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### Into the Lesson

In advance ask one of your musical students to lead the class in singing a familiar hymn about singing. Some possible hymns include:

"I Will Sing the Wondrous Story"

"I Will Sing of My Redeemer"

"Wonderful Words of Life"

"When We All Get to Heaven"

After singing, ask members to share how singing that song made them feel. In what day-to-day situations might humming or singing that song help them? Brainstorm with the class to create a list of situations in which listening to music or singing changes moods or energizes someone. A few of those times might be while exercising, when celebrating, when needing to get out of a sad mood, etc.

*Alternative.* Before class begins, place in chairs copies of the "Perfect Playlist" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Allow students to work individually or in small groups to choose a mood or situation and construct a playlist of songs that would be perfect for it.

Lead into Bible study by saying, "Singing, humming, whistling, and listening to music are powerful tools. There is nothing like a song to motivate, to comfort, or to express feelings that words alone cannot. Today we will look at a time when Mary reacted to her deep joy by singing."

### Into the Word

Read through the text as a class to get a feel for the overall flow of events. Briefly, the verses tell that after Mary received the message from Gabriel (last week's lesson), she packed and quickly made her way to her relative Elizabeth. When Mary arrived, the Holy Spirit revealed the significance of Mary's pregnancy to Elizabeth, who greeted her enthusiastically. Mary responded with a song of praise. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for most of the last three months of Elizabeth's pregnancy and the first three months of her own.

Divide the class into three groups, giving each group pen and paper. Each group is to read their assigned portion of the text and to create a diary entry based on the text and personal speculation.

*Group 1*—Elizabeth's diary ([Luke 1:39-45](#)). "I couldn't believe it! No sooner had Mary entered the house than I ..."

*Group 2*—Mary's diary ([vv. 46-55](#)). "After Elizabeth greeted me, I nearly exploded in song, singing about ..."

*Group 3*—The next three months ([v. 56](#)). "How the next three months flew by! We had so much to talk about ..."

After 10-15 minutes, allow groups to share their entries.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the "Mary and Hannah" activity from the reproducible page. Allow students to work individually or in groups. This will allow students to find the common themes between the song of Hannah in the Old Testament and Mary's song in Luke.

### Into Life

Today's Bible text tells of two relatives whose lives would not be the same from that day forward. Elisabeth had spent most of her adult lifetime wanting a child, but was unable to conceive—until God stepped in! Mary grew up with her nation in captivity and the future looking



bleak—until God stepped in!

Close in prayer, asking class members to consider how they would complete these two sentences:

I felt hopeless because \_\_\_\_\_

Then God stepped in by \_\_\_\_\_