

Expectant Mothers' Faith

Devotional Reading: [Philippians 4:10–19](#)

Background Scripture: [Luke 1:1–25, 39–45, 56–60](#)

[Luke 1:36–45, 56](#)

³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

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

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



Key Text

*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women,—***Luke 1:41–42a**

Faith That Pleases God

Unit 1: Profiles in Faith

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

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

1. Identify the relationship between the two expectant mothers.
2. Explain the significance of Elizabeth's greeting.
3. Suggest one way that he or she can move closer to having a faith as one or both expectant mothers had.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Infectious Joy
- B. Lesson Context

I. Acceptance of the Message (Luke 1:36–38)

- A. Encouragement to Believe (vv. 36–37)
- B. Belief and Submission (v. 38)

II. Joyous Meeting (Luke 1:39–45, 56)

- A. Hope-Filled Journey (vv. 39–40)
- B. Blessed Be the Mother (vv. 41–44)

When the King Comes to Us

- C. Blessed Be Your Faith (vv. 45, 56)

The Greater Blessed

Conclusion

- A. Two Models, Two Paths
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Caesarea Maritima	Sess-uh-ree-uh Mar-uh-tee-muh.
eulogy	you-luh-jee.
Gabriel	Gay-bree-ul.
Galilee	Gal-uh-lee.
Hebron	Hee-brun or Heb-run.
Levi	Lee-vye.
Levites	Lee-vites.
Nazareth	Naz-uh-reth.
synoptic	sih-nawp-tihk.
Thessalonians	Thess-uh- lo -nee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Zechariah	Zeck-uh-rye-uh.

Introduction

A. Infectious Joy

Early in our marriage, my wife was not certain whether she ever wanted children. That was something I had to work through because I was certain that I *did* want children to be part of our family. I ultimately decided that I hadn't married her for her ability to have children, and I had to leave the question in God's hands. However, she was interested in birthing as a profession, and she completed her training to become a *doula* (a Greek word meaning "female servant"), which is a labor and birth support worker. This means she was with women having babies a lot.

My wife's job had her working both with new parents and parents who were having their fifth or sixth child. In both cases, she witnessed a lot of pain but also the boundless joy of the parents as their babies were born. Her reluctance about having children changed, and now we have three. She desires more, saying that she would happily have six children if she could. This has even led us into looking at adoption. All of this happened because the joy of other parents was infectious.

In this lesson, we will see how joy can be infectious, from the unborn John the Baptist to his mother Elizabeth, to even the shared joy between Elizabeth and Mary.

B. Lesson Context

Early church tradition unanimously identified Luke, a physician and traveling companion of Paul, as the writer of the third Gospel and the book of Acts ([Colossians 4:11–14](#)). While the evidence is slim, there is a chance that Luke was the only Gentile author in the New Testament. Some scholars put the date of writing at around AD 60. This most likely occurred while Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea Maritima (as recorded in [Acts 23:33; 24:27](#)), which would have freed up Luke to interview the eyewitnesses of Jesus' earthly ministry ([Luke 1:1–3](#)). The accuracy of the resulting research puts Luke in the

company of the very best ancient Greek historians.

One of the eyewitnesses that Luke could have interviewed was Mary, the mother of Jesus. Such an interview would not be surprising, for the Gospel of Luke has more material regarding women than either of the other synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Mark. One example of this material unique to Luke's Gospel is Jesus' interaction with Mary and Martha in [Luke 10:38–42](#). Another example is today's text. As the text opens, the birth of the person who came to be known as John the Baptist has been foretold ([Luke 1:5–25](#)), as has been the birth of Jesus ([1:26–35](#))—both by angelic visitation.

I. Acceptance of the Message

([Luke 1:36–38](#))

A. Encouragement to Believe (vv. 36–37)

36. “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

The one speaking is the angel Gabriel, and the one being spoken to is Mary ([Luke 1:26–27](#)). Exactly how Elizabeth and Mary were related is not certain. Although the birth of Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, had already been foretold, the news apparently didn't reach Mary until this point, six months after the conception (compare [1:24](#)). That conception was miraculous, given that Elizabeth had been through menopause ([1:7, 18](#)). She and her husband had been childless to this point, given that Elizabeth *was said to be unable to conceive* (compare and contrast [Genesis 11:30; 25:21; 29:31; Judges 13:2–3; 1 Samuel 1:2](#)).

There is uncertainty as to exactly how old John's parents were. His father, Zechariah, was a priest, and priests were from the tribe of Levi. Levites had to retire at age 50 ([Numbers 8:25](#); compare [4:46–47](#)), but no specific age limit is found for priests. (All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.) Thus we should not be surprised that Zechariah was still serving in his priestly role ([Luke 1:8–9](#)). Additionally, the high priest typically served for life (see [Joshua 20:6](#)).

This information about Elizabeth's pregnancy would have strengthened Mary's faith. It confirmed what the angel Gabriel had just said about the child Mary would be bearing.

37. “For no word from God will ever fail.”

This verse may have reminded the original reader of Abraham and Sarah's struggle with infertility, for it is an allusion to [Genesis 18:14](#): “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” He would keep his promises, even if their fulfillment was impossible from a human perspective (see [Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27](#)).

What Do You Think?

How does [Luke 1:37](#) encourage your trust in God's Word?

Digging Deeper

How does Jesus' interpretation of Scripture in [Matthew 4:1–11](#) inform your response?

B. Belief and Submission (v. 38)

38. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Both the elderly priest Zechariah and the young virgin *Mary* asked the question, “How?” (Luke 1:18, 34). However, Gabriel’s responses to each of them differ. Zechariah asked skeptically for a sign—an inappropriate response from a person of his status. God responded with a sign, though probably not the kind Zechariah had expected (see 1:19–20). Mary’s reaction, on the other hand, was one of innocent inquiry, given her subsequent humility, as seen in the verse before us. She was willing to do whatever service that God would require of her. Young Mary’s faith surpassed that of an old priest! Mary’s faith can be compared and contrasted with Hannah’s (1 Samuel 1:10–20).

There is nothing in Gabriel’s response to suggest that God’s plan was contingent on Mary’s agreement with it. Even so, her statement of submission is important. The term Mary used to describe herself as *the Lord’s servant* is the same Greek word noted in the [Introduction](#), above (also in Luke 1:48 and Acts 2:18). In so doing, so she expressed her intended obedience to the Lord.

II. Joyous Meeting

(Luke 1:39–45, 56)

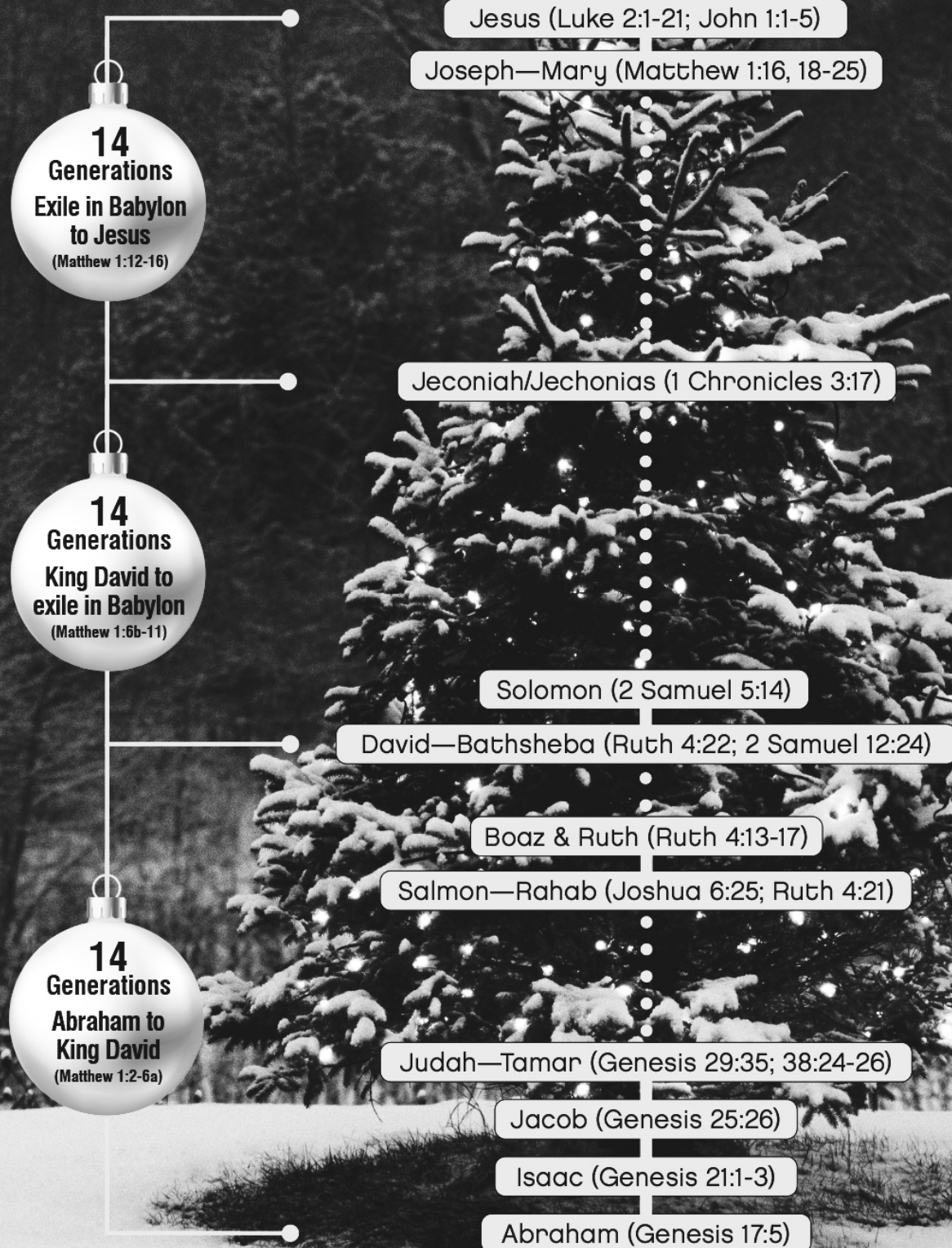
A. Hope-Filled Journey (vv. 39–40)

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

Mary lived in “Nazareth, a town in Galilee” (Luke 1:26), while Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, lived in an unnamed *town of Judea*. The exact location of their home is unknown, but *the hill country* would have included the city of Hebron, which was given to the priests (see Joshua 21:11). A journey from one to the other would have been about 100 miles. The two villages were located in different areas that later would have different rulers (see Matthew 2:22; Luke 3:1). But, in the time of the event depicted in this verse, Herod the Great ruled both (see 1:5).

Jesus' Family Tree

Matthew 1:1-17



Encourage learners to pray for God to work through their families this holiday season.

Hilly Judea is the district that included Jerusalem. If Hebron was not the unnamed city, then the trip would still be at least 35 miles, assuming that the city is at the northern tip of Judean territory. Either way, it's a long trip by foot! Mary most likely made the trip with a caravan or a companion for safety. Luke indicates that Mary traveled to see Elizabeth with a sense of urgency that may reflect that difficult travels are more manageable in the early stages of pregnancy. The haste in which she did so seems to reflect her eager desire to see this wonder that the angel told her of.

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to be a relative who your family can turn to during confusion, crisis, or need?

Digging Deeper

How will you improve your margin with time and money so that you can better help family members?

40. where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

Luke made no mention either of distance or exhaustion. Instead, he focused on the interactions of those present. On entering *the home*, Mary began a normal exchange of greetings with *Elizabeth*. There were several common greetings from that period, such as, "The blessing of Yahweh be upon you," or, "Be blessed of the Lord," or, "Peace be with you" (compare [Luke 24:36](#); [John 20:19–26](#)). We don't know which of these salutations Mary used, if any. Greetings in antiquity often included some type of kiss (examples: [Exodus 18:7](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:26](#)).

B. Blessed Be the Mother (vv. 41–44)

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

While no details are given as to exactly when Mary became pregnant, time factors indicate that she was not far enough along to be showing. Even so, *Elizabeth* realized that her younger relative was with child when the two met, provoking a startling reaction!

There is nothing inherently unusual about a baby moving about in the *womb*, of course. But the timing of that reaction here is significant in view of the relationship that later emerges between Jesus (Mary's child) and John the Baptist (Elizabeth's child). The latter was to be "filled with the Holy Spirit even before he [was] born" as empowerment "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" ([Luke 1:15–17](#)). Even before his birth, John began to fulfill his role by signaling to his mother that the anticipated Christ, himself yet unborn, was present. At the same time, *Elizabeth was filled* with the Spirit to confirm the message Mary had received from the angel (next verse).

The Holy Spirit is a key figure throughout the Scriptures written by Luke. His Gospel and the book of Acts combined feature about 60 percent of the New Testament's usages of this designation.

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

While Mary possibly would not have been showing as pregnant yet, her state was revealed to Elizabeth by the Holy Spirit. Not only that, but the identity of the child was also revealed to her. Elizabeth could not be silent concerning the events that were transpiring. She may have been in seclusion concerning her own pregnancy, but when the mother of the Lord shows up on her doorstep, Elizabeth became a *loud* proclaimer of the truth.

The word *blessed* occurs three times in today's text: twice here and once in verse 45. However, different Greek words are behind the translations. The word behind the two instances of "blessed" in the verse at hand is also our English word *eulogy*. As we use that word today, we refer to statements 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 celebrate with praises," or "to extol" someone, but not just at funerals. Elizabeth was speaking well of Mary while the latter was still very much alive!

Given the importance of this verse in certain religious circles, it is essential to note that these two statements do not speak to why Mary is blessed (but see [Luke 1:45](#), below). We can note at this point that doubled expressions of blessing have precedent in the Old Testament (see [Deuteronomy 28:3, 6](#); [Judges 5:24](#); [Psalm 144:15](#)).

What Do You Think?

What is one action you can take in the upcoming week so that others feel blessed when they are with you?

Digging Deeper

How does [Galatians 5:22–23](#) affect your response?

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

Elizabeth was the first person to acknowledge Jesus as *Lord*, even though Jesus was still in Mary's womb. In Scripture, the designation *my Lord* is used for both God and Jesus and is preferred by Luke. For comparative purposes, Mark uses the phrase *my Lord* 6 times, and Luke uses the designation 27 times! While it is uncertain precisely what Elizabeth understood by this address, the fact that she used it highlights her great faith that God was intervening in history. Elizabeth's question is one of great humility as well as divinely given insight.

When the King Comes to Us

A king paid a surprise visit to the house of his servant and—to no surprise—left the servant befuddled.

"Sir," stammered the servant, "What are you doing here?"

The servant's question and confusion were understandable. Why would a royal leader show up at the home of a lowly hireling? Was the servant in trouble? Did he do something wrong?

"I wanted to get to know your situation firsthand and see what needs of yours I can meet," replied the king.

For several minutes, the servant experienced a tidal wave of various emotions—inadequacy, gratitude, relief, joy, etc. Realizing his utter unworthiness to host the king humbled him.

Do you, Christian, experience a similar range of emotions when you reflect on the fact that the Son of God put on flesh to meet us on our own turf? Are you no less amazed than Elizabeth at the arrival of God’s grace to us in Christ? If not, what deficit do you need to address in this regard?

—D. D.

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

This verse repeats information from verse 41, above, and adds *for joy*. John the Baptist’s prenatal reaction seems somehow to have reflected his sense of anticipation of the coming of the one who would give meaning to John’s mission.

Since Elizabeth was six months along in her pregnancy, the child in her womb was developed enough for Elizabeth to feel movement—and John *the baby* really moved! As John the Baptist would reflect on rejoicing at the hearing of the bridegroom Jesus’ voice some 30 years hence ([Luke 3:23](#); [John 3:29](#)), so here John rejoiced at the hearing of Mary’s voice as she carried the unborn Jesus. And Elizabeth herself had some insight to discern that John’s movement was not arbitrary.

It is likely that the Spirit informed the unborn John who this was, and John leaped for joy. The whole reason for John’s existence was now here before him. The filling of Elizabeth by the Holy Spirit is what allowed her to discern what John’s sudden movement meant. She gave voice to the joy that the baby inside her felt.

[John 1:29–34](#) reveals that it wasn’t anything about John himself that caused him to recognize Jesus. Instead, God informed him of Jesus’ identity, and the same must be true here.

C. Blessed Be Your Faith (vv. 45, 56)

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

Elizabeth stated that Mary was blessed first, not because of Mary’s identity, but because of with whom Mary was pregnant. This is very much the same sort of salutation that Gabriel gave to Mary when he first appeared to her ([Luke 1:28](#)).

The Greek word translated *blessed* here and three verses later is not the same word translated that way in [Luke 1:42](#), above. The word under consideration here, occurring 50 times in the New Testament, will be the one that Jesus used later in pronouncing the Beatitudes ([Matthew 5:3–11](#)). It carries the sense of “enjoying favorable circumstances” (compare its translation as “happier” in [1 Corinthians 7:40](#)).

While the blessing of [Luke 1:42](#) was based on the fact that Mary was to bear the Messiah, the blessing pronounced here is based on her faith (*she who has believed*). Mary’s belief starkly contrasts the unbelief of the elderly priest Zechariah, father of John the Baptist (see [Luke 1:5–20](#)). Use of the word translated *blessed* usually includes a reason or explanation for someone to be regarded as blessed. We see such a reason here. Mary was blessed because she believed *that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her*.

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to imitate Mary's belief?

Digging Deeper

What distractions do you need to remove in order to do so?

The Greater Blessed

Jackie married her high school sweetheart, received an offer for her dream job, bought her dream house, and became pregnant in the same year. Every conversation she had with her friends resulted in the response: “You are so blessed!” Her sister, Jasmine, did not hear the same pronouncement nearly as often. Jasmine remained single and made less than half as much money as Jackie. But Jasmine was a Christian and a member of a church, while sister Jackie was not. Which of these two women was the greater blessed?

The answer to that depends on which lens you use in viewing their situations. Viewed strictly through a worldly lens, Jackie was the greater blessed; but viewed through the heavenly lens of eternity, the greater blessed is Jasmine.

Which lens do you use to view your own status and situation?

Have you forgotten how blessed you are to believe in Christ? It's easy to do in a world that casts God to the side and enthrones his gifts as gods themselves. But let Elizabeth's pronouncements of blessing remind you of the true nature of blessedness.

—D. D.

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

The *three months* spent with Elizabeth were undoubtedly an additional blessing for *Mary*. Here was a safe place for this young woman to adapt to her changed situation as *Elizabeth* provided support. Mary also was undoubtedly a blessing to Elizabeth in return, as the older woman in the latter stage of her pregnancy probably needed the help of a younger person.

Since the six months of [Luke 1:26, 36](#) plus the three months of the verse before us equals nine months, Mary would have left just before John's birth or just after it. Relatives were at the naming ceremony (see [Luke 1:58](#)), and these could have included Mary. But ultimately, this is speculation—the text does not say.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways you can provide hospitality and support to expectant mothers?

Digging Deeper

How is [James 1:27](#) relevant here?

Conclusion

A. Two Models, Two Paths

When it comes to belief and faith, I have often wondered whether I am more in the mold of Zechariah, with his doubts, than I am in the role of Mary, with her faith and acceptance. As I write this, there are multiple degrees in biblical studies hanging on my office wall, and I have 20 years of teaching experience at a Bible college under my belt. As a seasoned priest, Zechariah was similarly well-educated in the things of God. You would expect him to have the greater faith. But the greater faith is found with Mary.

Now I genuinely believe my education is a blessing and helps my faith. Yet there are times when I wonder whether my education distracts me from having faith like Mary's. Perhaps we trust in our learning and understanding to figure things out rather than trusting God, and in so doing violate [Proverbs 3:5–6](#): “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” Mary wasn't as formally educated as the learned priest. Yet, her belief was genuine. What Mary was asked to accept was not an easy thing, and God understood this. In encouraging Mary's faith, the angel pointed her both backward to the story of Abraham and Sarah and forward to what was happening to Elizabeth. God may call you to a role similar to that of the angel as you point another person backward to a champion of faith and forward to an example of how God is now working.

The joy experienced by John the Baptist and Elizabeth resulted from Mary's faith, at least in part. The ripple effect of this joy is also seen in passages such as [Matthew 2:10](#) and [Luke 2:10, 21–38](#) (contrast [Matthew 2:3](#)). That ripple effect reaches us here in the twenty-first century—or at least it should!

B. Prayer

Lord, thank you for the example of Mary's trusting belief. Show us how Mary's example can inform our own faith. Help us move ever more toward belief and faith! Thank you for the encouragement of your faithful people of the past as recorded in your Word. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Faith with obedience
leads to great joy.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Ask volunteers to give examples of ways that children have unique insight. You may want to write responses on the board.

Transition to another topic by asking, “What are some of the funny or clever things you have heard children say?”

Transition to a third topic by inviting any parents to share about times when their baby kicked in the womb more than usual or reacted to particular sounds or experiences. Ask, “What might the baby have been communicating to the mother?”

Option: Before class, do an online search for insights by kids. Share with the class the results of your search.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Baby Talk Translator” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing conclusions with a partner.

After either activity, say, “When Mary visited her relative Elizabeth, the unborn baby of Elizabeth reacted when hearing Mary’s voice. In today’s lesson, we will explore the significance of Elizabeth’s response.”

Into the Word

Ask three volunteers to play the parts of the angel, Mary, and Elizabeth. Have another volunteer read aloud [Luke 1:36–45](#), [56](#) and have the three volunteers reenact the events depicted in the Scripture. After reading, pause for a time of prayer to thank God for the miracle of the birth of Jesus.

Divide the class into two groups: **Mary Group** and **Elizabeth Group**. Ask each group to use the Scripture reading to develop a profile of the faith of their group’s namesake. Write these questions on the board to guide the groups:

1. What was the role of the Holy Spirit in each mother’s reactions?
2. How did each woman’s age affect her response?
3. What gave the women courage to accept and share their joy?
4. In what ways would the women have felt encouragement by having a relative who was also pregnant?
5. In what ways did the women respond with faith and courage to the call that God placed on their lives?
6. In one word, how would you describe the faith of Mary? of Elizabeth?

After 10 minutes, reconvene groups to share their profiles with the whole class.

Into Life

Ask learners to spend one minute in silent consideration regarding how they might respond in courage and faith to a call that God has given each of them.

Say, “One way that we can move closer to the kind of faith that both women had is through prais-

ing God in all circumstances, no matter how unusual or uncertain those circumstances may be.” Divide learners into pairs. Allow time for each learner to share with his or her partner three reasons for praising God despite any challenging circumstances that learners may be experiencing.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Write Your Own Song” activity from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before sharing their prayers of praise with a partner.

Conclude class with a time of worship and praise. Play Christmas songs that are related to today’s Scripture and meaningful to your congregation. Display the song lyrics for students to sing or read along as they choose.

Option. If learners wrote their own songs in the previous activity, ask volunteers to read what they wrote as prayers of praise to God.