

# THE FELLOWSHIP OF FAITH

## LUKE 1:39-45

### FELLOWSHIP SHARES, EVALUATES, AND ENCOURAGES FAITH.

#### I. SHARING OUR STORIES ARE IMPORTANT (VS 39-40)

**BEING A CHRISTIAN REQUIRES US TO TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND INITIATIVE IN BONDING WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS.**

- A. RESPONDING TO WHAT GOD IS DOING (39a)
- B. TAKING INITIATIVE (39b)
- C. SHARING GOD'S BLESSINGS AND STORIES (40)

#### II. OPEN TO SHARING OTHERS' BLESSINGS (VS 41-44)

**CHRISTIANS ARE HAPPY TO HEAR ABOUT HOW GOD IS WORKING IN OTHERS' LIVES.**

- A. BEING OPEN TO GOD'S LEADING (41)
- B. BEING WILLING TO BE USED BY GOD (42)
- C. BEING HUMBLE ENOUGH TO SHARE OTHER'S JOY (43-44)

#### III. SHARING FAITH AND GROWING FAITH (VS 45)

**AS WE WATCH GOD WORK IN AND THROUGH EACH OTHER, OUR FAITH IS STRENGTHENED AND WE GROW CLOSER TO GOD AND TO ONE ANOTHER.**

- A. BLESSED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH
- B. GOD IS THE ONE WHO WRITES AND COMPLETES THE PLAN

# The Fellowship of Faith

## Luke 1:39-45

Last time we were together we saw that Luke is describing the birth and ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. The angel Gabriel approached John's perspective father and Jesus' perspective mother. The angel described the supernatural birth of both babies and described the ministries of both. This morning, we are going to see an outpouring of praise by Elizabeth, John's future mother. Next week, the parallel will describe Mary's outpouring of praise.

What really stands out in this morning's text for me is this. We have two godly women who are in the process of being used mightily by God. Mary, the younger, responds to the angel's message by immediately seeking out her older cousin Elizabeth. Two things stand out. First of all, people often feel lonely or neglected in church. They may sometimes feel as if people are not reaching out to them. It seems to me that it is each person's duty to take initiative in starting relationships. In other words, Mary took the initiative to share her life with Elizabeth. Yes, people who have been in the congregation should reach out to strangers. However, if you are the newcomer, or if you are feeling neglected, it is also your responsibility to reach out to others as well. Christians don't stand on ceremony. There are no people who are more important or less important. We are all saved to serve God.

Secondly, it is important to share what God is doing in our lives. If we remain alone, then there is no guarantee that the messages we are receiving are from God. They may be from Satan. We always need others to help us discern what God is doing. Elizabeth and Mary shared their experience and determined the message was indeed from God. They became an encouragement to one another. The Apostle Paul warned people in the church at Corinth to be humble when claiming to hear from God. Paul warned them to let other prophets test their message. If we hope to grow in faith, we must be connected to other mature Christians who can help us test our interpretations and thoughts. The Apostle went on to describe how we can help one another discern spiritual messages:

*"<sup>5</sup>We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (II Corinthians 10:5 / NIV).*

I don't know, but it is often hard to get people to fellowship with one another. I remember that once I wanted to encourage this friendship so I told the congregation that I would be introducing a new twist in our worship service the following week. I would set aside a few minutes during the worship service for people to shake hands and introduce themselves to people around them. I noticed after the service a young couple went up to an older lady and introduced themselves. The old lady gave them a dirty look and said, "This friendliness stuff doesn't start 'til next Sunday."

There's nobody in our church like that, I'm pretty sure. But the point is; fellowship in faith is important to ensure we are on the right track and to help one another's faith grow. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **FELLOWSHIP SHARES, EVALUATES, AND**

**ENCOURAGES FAITH.** In other words, God gave us to one another as special gifts. We can help one another from getting off track, share our sorrows and joys together, and encourage one another in faith. This morning's text describes two godly women sharing their lives and their faith in God. My prayer is that we learn to share our faith journeys with one another because that's how God created us.

## **SHARING OUR STORIES ARE IMPORTANT (VS 39-40)**

Verses 39-40 demonstrate the fact that sharing our stories are important. **BEING A CHRISTIAN REQUIRES US TO TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND INITIATIVE IN BODING WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS.**

### **RESPONDING TO WHAT GOD IS DOING (39a)**

In the first half of verse 39, we see Mary responding to what God is doing. If we are truly Christians, then it is safe to say that God is working in our lives. In his letter to the Philippian Church, Paul says this:

*"<sup>6</sup>And I am sure that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on that day when Christ Jesus comes back again. ... <sup>13</sup>For God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him" (Philippians 1:6 & 2:13 / NLT).*

In other words, God is always doing something in our lives. It is our duty to recognize that and cooperate with His Holy Spirit. The angel Gabriel just told Mary this incredible calling she had been given. She would be giving birth to the Jewish Messiah and that her cousin Elizabeth would be participating in this plan by also giving birth miraculously. Look at how Mary responds to God's message. She immediately got ready and hurried.

We may not receive this kind of message from God but if we are reading our Bibles regularly and if we are participating in the worship on Sundays, then I can assure us that God is clearly speaking to us and working in our lives. As God is perfecting us and preparing us to live in heaven, it clearly becomes His will for our lives that we become more and more like Jesus every day. It is clearly God's desire that we pursue holiness by learning to be humble, honest, pure in mind and body, fair, loving, forgiving, truthful, self-controlled, and all sorts of other things. God puts in us the desire and the ability to do His will. We need to take Mary as an example; submit and obey immediately. There is no need for us to drag our feet. We know what God expects of us. We need to take that seriously and take action right away.

### **TAKING INITIATIVE (39b)**

The second half of verse 39 depicts Mary taking the initiative in this relationship. Elizabeth's pregnancy was a God-given sign to her that God was indeed the author of this plan. Mary took the initiative by going to a small town in the hill country of Judea. We may say, "Big deal, she went to visit her cousin." But let's just think about that. Mary was a teenage girl. Women lived isolated and sheltered lives until they got married. Mary probably had never left her neighborhood. This town in Judea is between 80 to 100 miles away. Women never traveled

alone and travel was dangerous. Luke doesn't tell us how Mary traveled, but this was no little undertaking. Mary took the initiative even though it was risky and frightening.

If you are a newcomer to our church, if you are a painfully shy introvert, or just plain uncertain in social settings, I know that it can be frightening to put yourself out there. Even though most of us try to get to know people, we may miss you. I know it feels like a huge risk to take, but I want to encourage you to take the initiative and introduce yourself to someone and please take the initiative to connect with us. Believe me, you'll find most of us as friendly people.

There is also another reason people fail to take the initiative to connect. Sometimes people think that there are sins in their past or present struggles they are going through that makes them undesirables. In other words, they feel that if they were to share these with someone, we would think they were awful or terrible. Believe me, that is a lie from Satan. He wants you for himself. I'm not saying to share this type of information with just anyone, but I can assure you that if you share this type of information with one of the pastoral staff or any board member, you will be surprised to see how much grace you will receive.

Of course if one is just plain lazy or self-centered enough to think they don't have to take the initiative, then I can't help that. Remember this one rule I hammer home in premarital counseling. As far as I know, God has not given us the gift of mindreading. If you have a need, you have to make it known. It is wrong to hold someone accountable for not reading your mind. Please learn to take initiative and share your needs, hurts, struggles, and joys. The Bible is clear that we are to share one another's joys and struggles. Mary is a brave and classy girl. She took the initiative to travel to Judea. I'm hoping we can be as brave and classy as Mary.

### **SHARING GOD'S BLESSINGS AND STORIES (40)**

In verse 40 we see Mary sharing God's blessings and stories. She found Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. I want us to see the humility and beauty of this greeting. The etiquette of the time could go either way here. It is Elizabeth's house so she should go out to meet and greet Mary. However, Mary is younger and it would be courteous for her to greet Elizabeth first. Whatever the protocol for the day was, Mary took the initiative and greeted Elizabeth first. But let's not miss this. Even though Mary is younger, her status will be above Elizabeth's because Mary's child will surpass Elizabeth's. John will be older but Jesus' ministry will surpass John's. Please make a mental note of this. In both cases, the younger surpasses the older. However, they never lord it over the other. Here, Mary humbles herself to greet Elizabeth. Later, Jesus will submit to John's baptism. This is a story about 2 godly women with 2 godly children. What a beautiful way to share life.

Based on what we have already learned from Luke, John will bring a great deal of joy to both his parents and to all of Israel because of his ministry. He will be great and his ministry will be great. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. Now in the Bible, and in the spiritual world, birth can also refer to conception. However, John's ministry will only be great because he is the forerunner of the Messiah Jesus. John is going to come in the power and spirit of Elijah and call people to repentance in preparation for Jesus' greater ministry of bringing salvation to the world. Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. John's ministry is to prepare people to receive Jesus. Mary never lords it over Elizabeth and Jesus never lords it over John.

When we share what God is doing in our lives with others, we must remember that there is no such thing as worldly status in church. There is neither male or female, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, or any other human categories. We are all God's children. We are to respect one another and one another's journeys. There is no room for pride or arrogance in God's church. What we are called to do is share one another's faith journeys. We must be looking for opportunities to obey God and allow Him to make us into the men and women He wants us to be. We must be brave enough to take the initiative in bonding with other believers. **BEING A CHRISTIAN REQUIRES US TO TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND INITIATIVE IN BONDING WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS.**

## **OPEN TO SHARING OTHERS' BLESSINGS (VS 41-44)**

Just as important as it is for us to be willing to share our stories with others, verses 41-44 remind us that we must be open to sharing others' blessings. There should be no jealousy or envy. **CHRISTIANS ARE HAPPY TO HEAR ABOUT HOW GOD IS WORKING IN OTHERS' LIVES.** I know that our culture teaches us to always be upwardly mobile, to get ahead, and to be self-promoting. However, the Christian way is the exact opposite.

### **BEING OPEN TO GOD'S LEADING (41)**

Verse 41 demonstrates that we must be open to God's leading when He is working in another person. We don't know the extent of Mary's greeting or how much of her story she shared with Elizabeth, but we now see Elizabeth's response. Her baby John, while still in the womb, recognized the presence of Mary and the baby Jesus in her womb. We know John was already filled with the Holy Spirit. He jumped with joy when he realized he was in the presence of Jesus. And then, God filled Elizabeth with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, we want to focus on our own agenda. We want things to go our way, and we often want to be recognized. Now keep in mind, Elizabeth's baby is going to become a great minister. Her pregnancy is miraculous in its own right. However, let's see how Elizabeth uses her status.

### **BEING WILLING TO BE USED BY GOD (42)**

Verse 42 shows her being willing to be used by God. It's not to promote herself or her baby. She has been given the gift of prophecy to promote Mary and her child, Jesus. Look what Elizabeth says. It says that she exclaimed this in a loud voice. Elizabeth was excited for Mary. She blurts out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." This is a Hebraism. Please take a special note of this. Elizabeth is an old, well respected woman. She is a dignified woman. And yet she pronounces this incredible blessing over this young teenage girl. The word blessed in Greek carries the sense of being happy, joyous, and the Hebrew sense of the word means to receive a special favor from God. She is extolling the importance of Mary and Mary's Son, Jesus. Elizabeth is not whining saying things like, "What about me? What about my baby? Hey, I deserve to be honored too." It's interesting to note that when John's disciples tell about the growing popularity of Jesus' ministry, John responds by saying:

*<sup>30</sup>He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less. <sup>31</sup>He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. I am of the earth, and my understanding is limited to the things of earth, but he has come from heaven" (John 3:30-31 / NLT).*

John was happy to share in the ministry of Jesus. Since we are by nature so narcissistic, it takes a conscious act of our will to say like John, “Jesus must increase in my life. I must decrease.” We always seem to want some recognition or payback for what we do. We often feel that if we obey God and do a lot of good works, we are entitled to some cosmic reward or recognition. I am really moved by Elizabeth’s humility and her use of her prophetic gift to encourage Mary and put her own status aside. I am moved at how quickly John humbles himself and so willing to fade into the background as Jesus starts to manifest Himself. I really do want to be like John. His life was an incredible success because he realized he belonged to God and his total purpose in life was to serve God. If we are authentically saved, then our mission in life is simply to be to serve and glorify God in all we say, think, and do. I really do want that for my life, for our lives.

### **BEING HUMBLE ENOUGH TO SHARE OTHER’S JOY (43-44)**

I think verses 43-44 provide us with a powerful example of how we must be humble enough to share other’s joy. It’s easy for us to celebrate and be happy when we receive something. But the Bible commands us to humbly share in one another’s joy. Look first at verse 43. Elizabeth is an old and respected woman. She has been incredibly blessed by God for her righteousness. But she says to this teenage girl Mary, “What have I done to deserve such an honor as to be visited by the mother of my Lord?” This is an extraordinary display of humility. Many people want to discredit the Bible in many ways. Some say that only the Gospel of John claims the divinity of Jesus. However, Luke has already referred to Him as the Son of God and the eternal King. Here Elizabeth is already referring to Jesus as her Lord. She is ecstatic over Mary’s visit. There is absolutely no jealousy in her. She even tells Mary that John jumped for joy in her womb.

The Bible commands us to be content with what we have and to be happy for what others have. There is no place for envy or jealousy in the Christian community because if we complain or are envious or jealous, we are actually accusing God of not being fair or treating us right. Those of us who have received blessings must be willing and eager to share with others and not lord it over anyone. We always need to be happy for people’s successes. Part of being Christian means that we are family. Let us rejoice when we see God working in someone. If God is working in someone in our community, we are going to benefit from this as well. I know this passage that Luke writes in the book Acts refers to money and possessions, but I think it also refers to blessings as well:

*“<sup>32</sup>All the believers were of one heart and mind, and they felt that what they owned was not their own; they shared everything they had” (Acts 4:32 / NLT).*

Let us learn to share our blessings and to be happy when others are blessed. **CHRISTIANS ARE HAPPY TO HEAR ABOUT HOW GOD IS WORKING IN OTHERS’ LIVES.**

### **SHARING FAITH AND GROWING FAITH (VS 45)**

Why should we share our stories, our journeys, and our blessings with others? Verse 45 shows how sharing our faith and growing in faith is a result of this kind of lifestyle. **AS WE WATCH GOD WORK IN AND THROUGH EACH OTHER, OUR FAITH IS STRENGTHENED AND WE GROW CLOSER TO GOD AND TO ONE ANOTHER.**

## **BLESSED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH**

First of all, we grow and are encouraged as we understand that we are blessed by grace through faith. Here we encounter the word blessed again. Elizabeth makes it clear that we appropriate God's blessings by receiving them in faith. People today are running all around trying to find happiness. People think money, relationships, sex, power, notoriety will bring them happiness. However, happiness and joy are gifts from God. People who are happy are only happy because God has granted them happiness and joy. Listen to this strange passage in Ecclesiastes:

*"<sup>1</sup>I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: <sup>2</sup>God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil" (Ecclesiastes 6:1-2 / NIV).*

I don't care what we think will make us happy and I don't care how passionately we pursue it, and it doesn't even matter if we get it, unless God enables us to enjoy it, we will never find happiness in this world. Remember the word happy and blessed are the same word in Greek. We only become happy as we learn to receive all of life as a gift from God. We become happy and blessed as we trust in God. If we diligently pursue holiness, we will receive happiness by grace through faith. I don't think I am overstating this. Look at verse 45. Elizabeth is clearly referring to Mary when she says, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her." But it could legitimately refer to Elizabeth also if she and her is used in a generic sense. It applies to all of us. When we believe what God says to us and obediently act on His word, we will be happy. What God says, He will do. He cannot lie.

## **GOD IS THE ONE WHO WRITES AND COMPLETES THE PLAN**

Lest we fall into some sort of health and wealth heresy, we see here that God is the One Who writes and completes the plan. The word used here for will be accomplished is *teliosis*. It comes from the root word *telos* which means completion, fulfillment, purpose, and other things. In other words, God creates things with a purpose. God created us with a purpose. He has plans for our lives. As we accomplish these things we could say that God has accomplished these things in our lives. Here we have two godly women fulfilling their purpose. They are giving birth to two sons who will affect the destiny of Israel and the Christian church. We have already said that these two women were blessed. They found happiness in serving God. But let me just remind us of the destinies of these two children. Elizabeth will get word that her son John was beheaded by Herod. Mary will watch her Son Jesus being publicly tortured, humiliating, and hanging on a cross. And yet because of these two women's obedience to God, we can now be in a right relationship with God. Just because we follow God does not guarantee that life will be bump-free for us. In fact, there will be a great deal of suffering. We will find a great deal of joy and happiness, but not the way the world defines happiness. Every time I read a particular passage in Luke's other book, Acts, I am amazed:

*"<sup>40</sup>They (the Jewish council) called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go. <sup>41</sup>The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus" (Acts 5:40-41 / NLT).*

Did you catch that? The apostles were beaten and yet as they went home, they high-fived each other and were happy that God considered them important enough to be beaten for His Name. You see, I think we need to get more focused on our identities and purpose. We are children of God and we are called to serve Him and Him alone. These types of faith experiences are meant to strengthen us and grow us in our faith. **AS WE WATCH GOD WORK IN AND THROUGH EACH OTHER, OUR FAITH IS STRENGTHENED AND WE GROW CLOSER TO GOD AND TO ONE ANOTHER.**

This thing called Christianity is meant to be lived out in the context of community. We often talk about fellowship as if it only were the sharing of money, possessions, and material things. But there is a spiritual component to fellowship. **FELLOWSHIP SHARES, EVALUATES, AND ENCOURAGES FAITH.** When we learn to share our faith journeys with one another, we can start to get a correct perspective on life and we can experience joy even in the most difficult situations. Mary and Elizabeth were in for a great deal of both joy and suffering. But they had one another to share the journey with. If we are going to be happy in Jesus, we need to learn what the expectations are. In his commentary on Luke, William Barclay lays out some pretty clear direction concerning this:

*“To be chosen by God so often means at one and the same time a crown of joy and cross of sorrow. The piercing truth is that God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it. God chooses us in order to use us. ... One great preacher said, ‘Jesus Christ came not to make life easy but to make men great.’*

It is the paradox of blessedness that it confers on a person at one and the same time the greatest joy and the greatest task in all the world.”

How about you and I, are we up to the task? Let me just remind us that we are called to share all the ups and downs of the Christian journey together.