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SONGS OF THE NATIVITY



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John Calvin

Selected Sermons on Luke 1 & 2

Translated into English by

ROBERT WHITE



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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PRAYER BEFORE THE SERMON¹

Let us call upon our good God and Father, beseeching him, since all fullness of wisdom and light is found in him, mercifully to enlighten us by his Holy Spirit in the true understanding of his word, and to give us grace to receive it in true fear and humility. May we be taught by his word to place our trust only in him and to serve and honour him as we ought, so that we may glorify his holy name in all our living and edify our neighbour by our good example, rendering to God the love and the obedience which faithful servants owe their masters, and children, their parents, since it has pleased him graciously to receive us among the number of his servants and children.

¹The Genevan liturgy of 1542 allowed, in the Sunday services, for a prayer of illumination to be said by the minister immediately before the sermon, but prescribed no set form of words. Calvin's practice was to use a prayer which he had already employed in the French church of Strasbourg, and which was modelled on Bucer's German liturgy. Text in *CO* 23.741-42; cf. *OS* 2.19-20.



I

WORKS OF GRACE

Now in those days Mary arose and went with haste into the mountains, to a city of Judah, ⁴⁰ and entered the house of Zechariah, and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And it happened that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² And she cried aloud, and said, 'You are blessed among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, immediately the voice of greeting reached my ears, the child leaped for joy in my womb' (Luke 1:39-44).

Scripture everywhere urges us not only to acknowledge secretly, in our hearts, the favours we have received from God's hand, but also to testify to him before men, so that his name may be glorified and our neighbours encouraged by our example to do likewise. For there are many who pretend to proclaim God's blessings, but who do so out of ambition and by way of boasting. That should not stop believers, however, doing what they should: once their hearts are truly moved to understand how much they owe God, they will encourage each other to do the same, so that all may be united in one accord.

An example is provided for us here. The virgin Mary resolved

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to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, not with the intention of gadding aimlessly about but so that each of them might better magnify God, and have fresh cause to strengthen the other in the faith. For although we ought simply to believe and accept God's word and to close our eyes to whatever might tempt us to doubt or distrust it, nevertheless when God by his action confirms his word to us, and when he not only opens his mouth to teach us but puts forth his hand to reveal his power, we should not despise such help. For our Lord takes pity on our weakness when he thus ratifies his word, and demonstrates that it is not empty but is capable of fulfilment.

Briefly, then, these are the two things we should note about Mary. In the first place she is not content to praise God for his kindness in sending an angel from heaven and in choosing her to bear the Saviour of the world. She wished it to be more widely known, and so turned to Elizabeth, who would welcome the news that she had conceived the Son of God more readily than anyone else she might tell. Who, indeed, would have believed her? She would simply have been laughed at. That is the reason for her reticence. But God had in different ways established a bond with Elizabeth. They had family in common; and Elizabeth, though barren and infirm with age, had obtained the special blessing of bearing a child against all the laws of nature, while the Virgin had conceived God's Son by a miracle beyond comprehension. That is why Mary comes to Elizabeth and reveals what God has also wrought in her. Then too, because seeing Elizabeth could greatly benefit her, Mary came in order to nurture her faith. For although she had a lively root of faith, and although she had declared, 'Behold the servant of the Lord', and had accepted the angel's message that nothing God promises is impossible to him, Mary realized her weakness and was anxious for anything which might strengthen her still more.¹

Works of Grace

Let us therefore learn from her example. If God should give us some token of his favour, we must bear witness to him before men. Our aim should be not only to confess him with our lips—a sacrifice he rightly demands of us—but to build everyone up and to urge each other on in perfect harmony and concord, so that the whole world may echo to his praises. That is what we must do, but it must be done without vanity. How many hypocrites we see who sing God's praises to all and sundry, and who even prate about the good things he has given them, but who only want to show off and earn the admiration of others. 'God did such and such for me', they will say. 'How greatly he has blessed me.' There is, of course, nothing innocent about them. They seek merely to make a name for themselves in the sight of men. Let us guard against this kind of vanity, and let us walk in all sincerity, that is, giving praise to God alone. So whenever we speak about what God has done, we should strive to show how much we depend on him alone, and how all we have comes freely from his bountiful hand. That, in short, is the first lesson this passage has for us.

There is a second lesson. When our Lord offers us helps to move forward in the faith, we should use them profitably. For we are blind indeed if we do not recognize that there is an element of weakness which remains in us. We may, to be sure, embrace God's word with full assurance and reverently trust in his faithfulness, believing that when we look to him we will never be disappointed: yet we are bound at times to falter. This shows that the devil is always putting trials of one sort or another in our way. When that happens, we see more clearly than before how foolish we were to imagine that our strength and stamina were sufficient, when so much else is needed to help us grow in faith. Therefore when God works mightily to bless both us and our neighbour, we should understand that that is how he seals his word to us and removes any cause we might have to doubt it. These two things we must do:

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observe God's hand at work; and also listen to his word.

If only we could shut our eyes to the things which in this world stop us trusting God and resting on his promises! For if we were to follow our own understanding and to judge everything by appearances, our minds would always be in a whirl and God would never have his rightful authority over us. That is why the word of God should be our sure and certain truth. There will inevitably be those who object: 'What about this? What about that?' We, for our part, ought to shut our eyes to anything which stops us believing in God. However, we should always open them to all that helps us properly consider his works. We will thus be led to conclude that he is fully able to do as he has said. That, I say, is how our faith can be assisted by such means. We must, first, carefully listen to God and sincerely assent to his word; then we must observe how he works to bless our neighbour and ourselves. May the many proofs he gives us serve to strengthen and enhance our trust in him. That is what the virgin Mary teaches us here.

We need hardly doubt that Mary found it hard to reach this city of Judah. For when the narrative says it was a city in a mountainous region, it implies that the journey was much longer than a visit to Jerusalem would have been. Now we all know that a young woman cannot venture abroad if she is unaccompanied. She may encounter dangers or difficulties much greater than a man might face. Despite that, Mary spares no effort to share her joy in God's grace with the woman who had similarly experienced God's favour toward her. Then too, Mary hoped to obtain an increase of faith because Elizabeth was pregnant at an age when she should have been barren, although earlier on she might have had children. That is how we may consciously profit from God's works.

Next we read that as soon as the virgin Mary greeted Elizabeth, the child leaped in her womb—meaning John the Baptist, whom Elizabeth was carrying. We know that it is natural for a woman to

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feel her child move if she is elated or surprised, or if on the other hand something frightens her. Here, however, it is not a natural movement that is meant. Elizabeth explains that it is no sudden, pleasurable sensation which affected her. Instead, she recognizes that the Holy Spirit was at work in her child, although he was as yet devoid of reason. This is not the place to argue whether John the Baptist had already received the Holy Spirit, so that he moved as if wishing to do homage to his Saviour. It is enough to say that God by his hidden power prompted him to move, just as he uses his other creatures who have neither reason nor feeling. We do not deny that God was at work through his Spirit, leading John, in his mother's womb, to acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ, not openly but in a way which is mysterious and unknown to us. In any event, it is enough for us to know that God had already testified to both Mary and Elizabeth that the fruit the Virgin bore was the Son of God, since John the Baptist, a tiny creature in his mother's womb, sensed in a child barely conceived the majesty of God. For when Mary received the angel's news Elizabeth was already six months pregnant: she must therefore have come very soon afterwards. And it is clear that she knew no rest or satisfaction until she had obtained this confirmation of faith, and had offered to God the sacrifice of praise that he deserved for so wonderful a work.

That is why Luke makes a point of saying she came in haste. He is not content to tell us merely that she undertook the journey, but implies that she overcame all the obstacles which might have detained or delayed her, so keen was she to rejoice and to confirm the truth—never doubted—of the angel's message from God. Here, then, is another detail worth noting: Mary's haste and eagerness.

As we will see, God did not allow her visit to go unrewarded. He gave her more than she could have wished or expected, as John the Baptist attested. That indeed was the task for which John had

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been commissioned. God in his eternal counsel had chosen him to be Christ's herald, to go before and make a way for him, and to prepare the Jews to welcome him as their promised Saviour. He had not yet assumed that office, but already God was at work, enabling him already to proclaim our Lord's coming. John had not yet uttered a word, nor could he see. Even so the movement which his mother felt was like a trumpet sound and, along with Mary, she was bound to see in it proof of Jesus' divine majesty.

Now this was not done for the sake of these two women only. It was also for our instruction, which is why Scripture records it. Understand, then, that God had already revealed to both Mary and Elizabeth that the fruit of Mary's womb was the Redeemer of the world. So today we clearly have no excuse if we do not welcome him peaceably and trust him fully for our salvation, since miracles thus gave evidence of who he is. And although these things went unnoticed among men (since no-one at the time was able to receive this testimony from God), today we should aim to profit by it. Neither of these women enjoyed particular esteem. We comprehend their worth only when we see the dignity which God conferred on them. He revealed the secret to them so that, when they made it known, our faith might be confirmed. We confess therefore that God truly spoke by their mouth, and means us to pay reverent attention to them, as if angels themselves had come down from heaven.² Let us heed this teaching.

Accordingly, Luke adds that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. The intention here is to stress that what we are told next is to be regarded as something said, not by a mere woman, but by one to whom God had given the gift of prophecy, and whom he had raised up high as if, in her person, he himself were speaking. That is what is meant by the phrase filled with the Holy Spirit. Certainly Elizabeth could not have lived so holy a life if God's Spirit had not been controlling her. For by nature our mind is completely hostile