

WORKING TOGETHER

WEEKLY THEME:

UNITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

BASED ON:

Ephesians 4:1–16

KEEP IN MIND:

Ephesians 4:4–5

FROM YOUR BIBLE:

The Scripture text is in the student lesson under “Learning From God.”

PURPOSE OF THE LESSON

During this lesson, Juniors will explore characteristics of a life worthy of Christ’s calling in building up the body of Christ. They will celebrate their gifts that help build up the body of Christ, and state an interpretation of having “one faith, one baptism, one God of all” as it relates to the building up of the body of Christ.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

1. Suggested Materials—Bibles, student magazines, pens or pencils, a timer (or stopwatch) two shoeboxes, a few small prizes, and thank you cards from your *Teaching Success Kit*.

2. Lesson Background—For background information, read Ephesians 4:1–16. Be sure to read the student lesson. Also, see Bible Study Guide 3 in the white pages of this book, as well as in the UMI Annual Commentary, *Precepts for Living*®.

In spite of all the ethnicities, doctrines, and ministries that comprise the body of Christ, we function most effectively when we “[m]ake every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3, NIV). Paul uses this portion of his letter to address and encourage the use of what believers have in common.

As one body in Christ, we are called by one Spirit, and share one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all (vv. 4–6).

Paul notes how God has imparted a variety of ministries to His church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. These different ministries are given for the common goal of building up and equipping God’s people for

works of service. Encourage Juniors to discover their gift and unite with others to work in the service of the Lord. By working together as mature believers, we will more effectively display the true character of the Son, that the world may be one.

OPEN THE LESSON

Get Started Activity

Review last week’s “Doing My Part” activity. Then, have Juniors form two circles. Place a shoebox on the floor in the center of each circle. Set a timer for five minutes, and instruct students to work together to move the box from the floor to the top of a desk or chair without using their hands. Give small prizes to the group that finishes within the allotted time.

What’s It All About?

Teaching time about 4–8 minutes

Student Story: Working Together

“We sing together as one, for the glory of the Son, that our community may be won!” This was the declaration the Unity Choir made at the beginning of each rehearsal.

The Unity Choir was conceived by Sister Higgins to encourage the Christian youth in her community to utilize their gifts to reach the community for Christ. After three months of intense rehearsals, she held a meeting. She informed the group that it was far from ready to truly minister its gift to the community.

“It has nothing to do with your music. You sound great!” Sister Higgins said. “The music is beautiful. But the truth is, you fall short of your declaration.”

The choir members stared back at her with sour expressions, waiting for an explanation.

“You sing these lovely songs, but then you behave in such an unloving manner toward one another. That contradicts the whole idea of being ‘one.’ I’ve seen the way you fight and argue. I take calls from some of your parents who are concerned about your attitudes. Some of you come to me in private to say you want to quit because of the meanness of others. We are a unity choir, but it cannot be pretend unity. True unity comes as you grow in Christ. We have to live lives worthy of our gifts.”

What was the mission of the Unity Choir? Why did Sister Higgins determine that the members of the Unity Choir were not ready to fulfill their mission? What did she mean by, “We have to live lives worthy of our gifts”? How is that related to unity?

PRESENT THE SCRIPTURES

Learning From God

Teaching time about 10–15 minutes

After reading the passage, ask the students to identify the key word emphasized in the lesson's text (one). Point out that through Christ, there is only one true faith, baptism, God, and Father of us all. Discuss how oneness can be achieved when everyone has different gifts. Also, discuss how Juniors can use their gifts to build up the body of Christ.

What I Have Learned

Teaching time about 5–8 minutes

Juniors will fill in the blanks using today's Scripture.

Answers: 1. worthy; 2. love; 3. the bond of peace; 4. grace; 5. apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers; 6. the body of Christ

Juniorway® Bible Activities

For additional material, see the activity for this lesson in the *JBA® (Juniorway® Bible Activities)* book.

Keep In Mind

Teaching time about 2–3 minutes

Have Juniors practice the verses by saying them aloud several times in unison.

EXPLORE THE MEANING

Choosing What's Best

Teaching time about 4–8 minutes

Juniors are asked to review Ephesians 4:2 and give examples of each of the characteristics listed. Allow volunteers to read their examples.

NEXT STEPS FOR APPLICATION

Doing My Part

Teaching time about 2–3 minutes

Juniors are challenged to celebrate the gifts that help build up the body of Christ through letter or card writing. A thank-you card is included in your *Teaching Success Kit* for use with this lesson.

NOTES

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Unity in the Body of Christ

Bible Background • EPHESIANS 4:1–16

Printed Text • EPHESIANS 4:1–16 | Devotional Reading • ROMANS 12:3–8

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLORE characteristics of a life worthy of Christ's calling in building up the body of Christ; CELEBRATE our gifts that help build up the body of Christ; and UNDERSTAND the meaning of the statement "... one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" as it relates to building up the body of Christ.

In Focus

Aaron said a quick prayer of thanksgiving to God that he was able to walk away from Deacon Foster without an argument. Deacon Foster was a fine deacon, but as he advanced in age, his temperament was becoming more disagreeable. Aaron still had great respect for him, but Aaron and many of the younger members of the church sought some changes in the ministries of the church, including its business practices. Some members were frustrated because they wanted to use their gifts within the church in a more meaningful way.

Aaron laughed to himself, "I'm 42 years old, but 'Deac' still looks at me as one of the young folks in the church."

Deacon Foster saw no need for changes. The church had operated just fine for 137 years, and would continue to do so. That's when Aaron prayed. There was a time when he would have exploded all over the elderly deacon for being so shortsighted. "By the grace of God," he thought, "I am maturing in Christ."

How can Aaron and the other younger church members use their spiritual gifts to help build up their church? Although each church has its problems, what are some of the ways you can use your gifts to build up your church? Paul helps us in today's lesson to find some answers.

Keep in Mind

"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4–5, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV **Ephesians 4:1** I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,

2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;

3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;

5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

9 Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?

10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:

14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

The People, Places, and Times

Gifts. Spiritual gifts are the skills and abilities given to all believers by the Father through His Spirit. These gifts are for the purpose of enabling Christians to carry out His plan. Jesus promised His disciples that they also would receive the gift of the Spirit, who would guide them (Mark 13:11; Luke 11:13). His promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–47). The Spirit was given to every believer. Paul's epistles (letters to the churches) reveal that this continued in all the churches. Every believer receives gifting from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). Spiritual gifts are for the benefit of the body of believers, not just for

individual benefit or pleasure. The greatest gift, which Paul said every believer should possess, is love (1 Corinthians 12:31–13:1).

Background

In previous portions of his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul laid the foundation concerning Christ and His Church. Now, he switches his focus to a more practical purpose, setting out guidelines for his readers concerning Christian conduct. But first, he decides to give them an overview of the church's place in the world. Paul called for the Ephesians to be true to who they are called to be in Christ and noted several truths for them to embrace: (1)

it's their responsibility to be one in the body; (2) the call for unity does not mean that they should strive for a type of dull sameness; (3) the church is a living organism, made up of living beings who are expected to grow according to their use of the gifts Christ has given them; (4) Christ desires that the church reach maturity and that the people of the church be prepared to exercise their gifts; and (5) as the church grows, its members should take on the nature and character of its head, Christ Jesus.

At-A-Glance

1. The Church's Calling to Unity (Ephesians 4:1–6)
2. The Church's Gifts (vv. 7–12)
3. The Road to Maturity (vv. 13–16)

In Depth

1. The Church's Calling to Unity (Ephesians 4:1–6)

Paul considered himself a prisoner for the Lord as well as one who belonged to the Lord. Always positioning himself as the example, he issued a plea to the Ephesian Christians to walk worthy of their “vocation,” or to live in a manner that is consistent with their high calling from God (v. 1). The Christian's call is the divine summons that was answered at the time of conversion. Our calling is not a hobby or a pastime. It is our life's achievement—our job.

The word “walk” is a literal translation of a Hebrew idiom for everyday conduct. The word “worthy” makes the connection between God's plan for us and our acceptance of that plan, as demonstrated in the way we live. Paul had previously cautioned against boasting concerning good works. Now, he advises them to live out their calling with humility. He did not want them to become arrogant about their

godly living. They were also to exercise patience toward the faults and failings of others and among those with different personality types and temperaments. We are to genuinely have patience for one another with love. The reason for possessing these qualities—“lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing”—is for unity within the body of Christ (v. 2). When Christ established the Church, He abolished the greatest dividing line within humanity—the barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles.

Now it was the responsibility of the early church members to try with all earnestness to avoid creating human divisions among God's people. Arguments and dissension threaten to destroy the “bond of peace” within the body of Christ. There is but one Spirit in the church; nothing can destroy that unity. However, bickering and quarrels can destroy the peace that binds the members of the body of Christ. A healthy formula for keeping the unity is threefold: unity in those things that are essential to the faith, liberty in those matters that are nonessential or not absolute, and love in all circumstances.

In spite of the vast number of Christian churches worldwide, there is only one body of believers. The same Spirit who dwells in every believer also dwells in the body of Christ. There is but one hope in which every believer has placed his or her trust. Our one Lord is the Savior who shed His blood for our sins. We all share a common faith in that one Lord and Savior. There is one baptism by which we profess our faith in Christ. The one God and Father is supreme above all.

2. The Church's Gifts (vv. 7–12)

The unity of the church must be balanced by its odd twin, diversity. Unity is often confused with uniformity. The Christian Church is communal; every member makes a contribution. Each member of the body of

Christ has been given grace, or a particular gift or role to fulfill. No two members are alike. No member should try to imitate the other's gifts. In other letters, Paul outlines the necessity for giving equal value to the gifts of every believer. By His grace, He has given these gifts as He sees fit. The risen Lord bestowed these gifts by first sending His most excellent gift, the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4:8, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 as a prophecy that the Messiah would ascend to heaven, conquer His foes, and lead them captive. As a reward for His victory, He would receive gifts for humankind.

In Ephesians 4:9, Paul wanted to show that the prophecy could have referred only to Christ. If Jesus ascended into heaven, He must have first come down from heaven. Paul and others understood "lower parts of the earth" to mean that Christ descended into hell. The Gospel of Luke, however, indicates that His spirit went to heaven when He died (Luke 23:43, 46). The prophecy of Psalm 68:18 was fulfilled by the birth, death, and burial of Jesus. The ascended Christ is the giver of all gifts and the source of all blessings. He fills all things. In giving us gifts, Christ has a specific purpose in sight. All of God's saints are to be equipped with the gifts necessary to discharge their duties in the world.

In Ephesians 4:10, Paul proceeds to explain the nature of some of these gifts of grace. Apostles were those persons directly commissioned by the Lord to preach the Word and plant churches. They were those who had seen the risen Christ. Prophets were the mouthpieces for God. They received revelations directly from the Lord, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, and passed them on to the church. Evangelists are those who preach the Good News. They have been divinely equipped to go out into the world and lead persons to Christ. Pastors are those who serve as God's under-shepherds, caring for the sheep of His flock. It is their responsibility to guide and feed the

flock. The New Testament gives the impression of a number of pastors at a local church instead of one (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1–2).

Teachers are persons divinely gifted to teach and explain the Bible and what it means. A Bible teacher endeavors to connect God's Word into everyday life. The purpose of all these gifts is for leaders to enable "the perfecting (or equipping) of the saints" so that all are prepared "for the work of the ministry" and, ultimately, "for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). These gifts should always be used to empower others to do even greater deeds for the sake of the kingdom.

3. The Road to Maturity (vv. 13–16)

At this point, Paul may have anticipated the question, "How long will this process of growing continue?" In verse 13, Paul explains that this will go on "Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." Little can prepare the mind for the unity that exists in the afterlife. As long as we live, no matter how hard we try, we will have innumerable differences. This will continue until we are able to see Him as He truly is and to know as we are known. At that time the "unity of the faith" will occur. Until then, there will be room for growth. When we obtain full knowledge, we enter the state of "perfect man." The word "perfect," used in the King James Version, is translated as "complete." Our Christian journey is done when we come to the place of full knowledge of Christ and unity of our faith.

Verses 14–15 describe the growth process in the body of Christ. As we continue toward spiritual maturity, some things will become apparent. We are no longer like "children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (v. 14). As we grow to be more like Him, we grow in our knowledge of Him. Our understanding is solid and sure. No one can then

persuade us to change our beliefs. All disciples are called upon to grow. Discipleship is a process. It is not a course of study from which we will earn a diploma and never revisit again. There is always room for growth, for training, for new understanding, and for enlightenment. As we grow in Christ, so do our challenges. The longer we live, if we are achieving spiritual maturity, we learn to lean on Him more, trusting more fully in His promises and His providence. When we encounter brothers and sisters who have gone astray in their thinking and beliefs, we are commanded to speak “the truth in love,” helping each other to grow toward the head, which is Christ Jesus. He is both the goal of our growth and the source of our growth. As the church receives its life from Him who supplies all of our needs, quite naturally, growth comes from Him, too. But Paul adds that the church grows “toward” Christ as we as individuals grow “in” Christ.

Search the Scriptures

1. What did Paul “beseech” the Ephesian Christians to do (Ephesians 4:1)?
2. What reasons does Paul give them for exhibiting characteristics such as lowliness and meekness (v. 3)?
3. What are the seven things we are to share as one (vv. 4–6)?
4. How is the body of Christ put together through Christ (v. 16)?

Discuss the Meaning

Some Christians tend to forget that their talents and abilities are spiritual gifts from God. In what ways do believers begin to take credit for themselves? Include yourself.

Liberating Lesson

There is a real danger among Christians to look at ourselves as having “arrived” in regard to our spiritual growth. We can never fully know God in this life; therefore, Christian discipleship

is not a course of study to be completed. It is a process that causes us to change and grow continuously if we yield ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are never too old to learn in matters concerning the kingdom. The oldest, most seasoned Christian can still learn about God’s love from a newborn baby. A true sign of Christian maturity is in knowing there is still more to be known.

Application for Activation

Are there ways that you stunt your own spiritual growth because you are not willing to lend yourself to new challenges that are presented to you? Do you ever think, “I’m too old to be learning how to do that now,” or “I’ve lived long enough to know what I’m talking about”? Think about an area of your life where you may be inhibiting your spiritual development, thereby building a wedge between you and the Father.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

Butler, Trent, ed. *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991.

Dictionary.com. <http://dictionary.reference.com/> (accessed October 20, 2011).

Henry, Matthew. "Ephesians 4." Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible. Vol. VI –Acts to Revelation. Christian Classics Ethereal Library.org. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.Eph.html> (accessed October 20, 2011).

New Testament Greek Lexicon. Bible Study Tools.com. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/> (accessed October 20, 2011).

Say It Correctly

Stature. **STACH**-er.
Sleight. **slite**.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

One Lord
(Zechariah 14:6–11)

TUESDAY

One Faith
(Philippians 1:27–30)

WEDNESDAY

One in Christ Jesus
(Galatians 3:23–29)

THURSDAY

One God
(Exodus 20:1–7)

FRIDAY

One Spirit
(1 Corinthians 12:4–13)

SATURDAY

One Body
(Romans 12:3–8)

SUNDAY

Building Up the Body Together
(Ephesians 4:1–16)

Notes

A VERY SPECIAL GIFT

WEEKLY THEME:

ACCORDING TO THE PROMISE

BASED ON:

Luke 1:46–55

KEEP IN MIND:

Luke 1:46–47

FROM YOUR BIBLE:

The Scripture text is in the student lesson under “Learning From God.”

PURPOSE OF THE LESSON

During this lesson, Juniors will review Mary’s song praising God’s faithfulness, appreciate the faithfulness of God’s people from generation to generation, and examine areas in their lives where their faithfulness to God can be strengthened.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

1. Suggested Materials—Bibles, student magazines, paper, and pencils

2. Lesson Background—For background information, read Luke 1:26–56. Be sure to read the student lesson. Also, see “Bible Study Guide 4” in the white pages of this book.

These verses are often called the “Magnificat,” which is from the Latin word meaning “glorifies.” Mary sang this psalm of praise, which is frequently compared to the joyous song that Hannah sang concerning the hand of God in the birth of her son, Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1–10).

Mary praised God for His faithfulness to the people of Israel, going all the way back to the beginning of that nation with Father Abraham. She gave thanks that God is not like humans who give preference to the strong and the mighty, but He looks after the weak and the humble and raises them up while He puts down those who are great in their own eyes. Mary celebrated God for the gift He gave to not only her but to anyone who accepts the gift. Though Juniors may sometimes forget, Christmas is a time for giving. It all started when God gave His Son, Jesus. Students should be encouraged to give God praise, obedience, and faith as they celebrate Christ’s birth today.

OPEN THE LESSON

Get Started Activity

Review last week’s “Doing My Part” activity. Then, since it is Christmas Day and students’ minds may be centered on gifts, ask students to describe the best gift they ever received. Ask why it was so special. Remind your class that we give gifts on this day because God gave us a very special gift—His own Son, who came to bring salvation to us from our sins.

What’s It All About?

Teaching time about 4–8 minutes

Student Story: A Very Special Gift

It was to be a special gift. The parents saw one in the store window and they knew their daughter would just love it. Unfortunately, that one had been sold and it was the very last one the store had.

“I can make you another,” the store owner said, “and I will do my best to get it to you by Christmas Eve, although there’s not much time left.”

And now it was Christmas Eve—late on Christmas Eve—and nothing had arrived.

“He’s not coming,” the father said sadly. “I guess we will have to do without that special gift for our daughter.”

In the midst of their sorrow, after all hope had gone, there was a noise outside and then a knock on the door. “Sorry to be so late,” the store owner explained. “My van broke down this morning and put me behind on my deliveries, but I promised to be here with this gift and I did not want to let you—or the very special person it’s probably going to—down.”

How do you think the parents felt before the store owner arrived, as it got later and later? How do you think they felt when he showed up? Why did the owner not wait until the next day to come? Why was it important for him to keep his promise, even if he ran into trouble? Do you count on people to keep the promises they make to you? How do you respond when someone keeps a promise made to you?

PRESENT THE SCRIPTURES

Learning From God

Teaching time about 10–15 minutes

Discuss the content of Mary's song. It dealt with two main points, one being the faithfulness of God. He had not forgotten His promises, and "in the fullness of time," Jesus was born. Second, Mary knew that she was chosen because of God's grace. Her song expressed appreciation for God's dealing with the lowly and humble. Ask if it is possible for us to rejoice with Mary in her song of praise. If so, why?

What I Have Learned

Teaching time about 5–8 minutes

Match the first half of these sentences with the correct second half.

1. He has shown mighty deeds (strength) with his arm. **B. He has scattered those who are proud.**

2. He has brought down mighty rulers from their seats or thrones. **A. He has exalted or lifted up the low and humble.**

3. He has filled the hungry with good things. **C. He has sent the rich away empty.**

4. Why did Mary declare that all would call her blessed? **Mary declared that all would call her blessed because the Lord had done great things for her. She would give birth to Jesus.**

5. Mary proclaimed that God was merciful to whom? **To all who fear him in every generation of people.**

Juniorway® Bible Activities

For additional material, see the activity for this lesson in the JBA® (*Juniorway® Bible Activities*) book.

Keep In Mind

Teaching time about 2–3 minutes

Have the class repeat this verse several times together.

EXPLORE THE MEANING

Choosing What's Best

Teaching time about 4–8 minutes

Juniors are asked to describe how the examples of faithfulness they have learned about so far this quarter makes them feel. They are also to discuss what those examples make them think about their own faithfulness. Allow volunteers to discuss their responses.

NEXT STEPS FOR APPLICATION

Doing My Part

Teaching time about 2–3 minutes

Juniors are challenged to either decide to accept the wonderful gift of salvation from God, or spend time each day this week praising God for their gift. Be ready to speak with any Junior who desires to accept the precious gift of Jesus into their lives today.

NOTES

According to the Promise

Bible Background • LUKE 1:26–56; GALATIANS 3:6–18

Printed Text • LUKE 1:46–55 | Devotional Reading • 2 CORINTHIANS 1:18–22

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: REVIEW Mary's song praising God's faithfulness; APPRECIATE the faithfulness of God's people from generation to generation; and EXAMINE areas in our lives where our faithfulness to God can be strengthened.

In Focus

It was Christmas morning, and it was Brenda's ex-husband's turn to have the children. Brenda felt so alone. Life just had not worked out the way she had thought it would. She walked into church and Michelle gave her a great big hug.

"Where are the kids?" Michelle asked.

"Their father has them," Brenda answered, as the tears streamed down her face.

"Come sit by me," said Michelle, as she enfolded Brenda in her arms.

Michelle allowed Brenda to freely cry out of her pain and disappointments. She did not try to console her with words; just her touch seemed to comfort Brenda.

Brenda remembered how her family had once been whole – intact. She vowed that her children would never have to live and deal with the problems of a dysfunctional home as she did. She vowed that she would do all she could to honor God with her marriage. She did all she could, but problems still came into marriage and ripped it apart. No matter what she did or did not do, her husband still chose to leave the marriage. Now, on Christmas Day, her precious little ones were spending time with their dad, instead of with the two of them together. Brenda's heart seemed to break in two.

God was still caring for Brenda and loving her, even in a very rough situation. God is always faithful. Sometimes we just have to ask God to help us see things from His perspective.

Keep in Mind

"And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:46–47, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Luke 1:46** And Mary said my soul doth magnify the Lord,

47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

48 For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

54 He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;

55 As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

The People, Places, and Times

Angels. Angels are created beings whose primary purpose is to serve God and worship Him. Some angels are used specifically to bring messages to people from God. These angels appear like human beings and are never described as having wings. They are never described as children or women. The angels with wings are the cherubim and seraphim. The cherubim and seraphim never leave the immediate presence of God and are continually worshipping Him. Since angels are created, they have a beginning. They are not all-knowing or present everywhere as God is. They do not marry.

Background

Mary sang the beautiful words of today's Scripture passage while she was visiting Elizabeth, her relative. Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were an elderly, childless couple. They had prayed many years for a child until they reached the age where they no longer expected God to answer this request. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were of the tribe of Aaron, so Zechariah was in rotation for serving at the Temple in Jerusalem.

After Luke's introduction to his Gospel record, he plunges right into the story of the birth of John the Baptist. It was Zechariah's turn to serve at the Temple, a great privilege for a godly Jew. As he went in to burn incense, suddenly the angel Gabriel was standing beside the incense altar (Luke 1:11). Zechariah had the same reaction that all who have ever been visited by an angel had—he was afraid.

After telling him not to be afraid, Gabriel told Zechariah that God was answering his and Elizabeth's prayers for a child, a very special child that they were to name "John" (v. 13). Unfortunately, Zechariah found this hard to believe, and so he became speechless until after the birth of John, their baby. John grew up to be the prophet we know as John the Baptist (or Baptizer).

Word must have traveled, in spite of the lack of modern communication devices, because Mary heard that her elderly relative was now pregnant. Mary was on the other end of the age spectrum, probably only around 15 years old, the age when women of those days usually got married. Gabriel had also visited Mary to tell her that she would be pregnant in the most miraculous way ever (vv. 26–38). Mary was going to give birth to the Son of God and this would be a virgin birth.

Shortly after Gabriel's announcement to Mary, she hurried to see Elizabeth (about an 80-mile hike). As soon as she walked in the door and Elizabeth heard her, baby John in her womb leaped in praise at the presence of the Baby who was growing within Mary. At this time, Elizabeth was already six months pregnant, while Mary's pregnancy had just begun. After Elizabeth had finished praising God for the coming Savior, Mary began singing a song of praise to God that reminds us very much of Hannah's song of praise when she became pregnant with baby Samuel in answer to her prayers. The similarity of Mary's prayer to others in the Bible makes us think that Mary studied Scripture and meditated upon it even in an era when women had little access to formal education.

At-A-Glance

1. God's Personal Blessing on Mary (Luke 1:46–49)
2. God's Blessings on His People (vv. 50–53)
3. God's Faithfulness in Sending the Messiah (vv. 54–55)

In Depth

1. God's Personal Blessing on Mary (Luke 1:46–49)

This stanza of Mary's song sings of how blessed she is. From a worldly perspective, this would seem to be the opposite of Mary's situation. Mary came from Nazareth, a town that was so poor that many of its few inhabitants lived in caves. She was engaged to a very godly man with a respectable job, but now she was pregnant – and not by him. Where are the blessings in such a situation?

First, she rejoices because God is her Savior. Every Christian, regardless of his or her

situation, should remember that the greatest blessing is to have God as Savior. Then, thinking upon the news from angel Gabriel, Mary praises God for choosing her for this blessing, in spite of her humble status – she is poor and a woman, two things that in that era assigned one to an automatic inferior status.

But Mary does not see her lowly status as a disadvantage in the sight of the Lord. God delights in blessing the ones who are of a very humble socio-economic status, but who put all of their trust in the Lord.

2. God's Blessings on His People (vv. 50–53)

Mary has trust in the Lord showing mercy to His people, because she knows that Scripture details how God had blessed His people in the past. This is more than simple optimism. This is hope based upon knowledge of how God has worked in the past. Based upon how He has blessed His people, Mary knows that He will continue to do so in the future.

As we look closely at the things that Mary sings about concerning how God acts, we see that when Jesus came to the earth, He brought about a moral revolution. He is using His mighty arm to sweep aside the proud. Pride has no place in the Christian because our standard is Jesus Christ. When we see ourselves compared to Him, we realize how far we are from how God desires us to be.

Then we see a social revolution. Jesus brings an end to the labels and titles that people think elevate them. In the sight of our Lord, the lowest person is just as important as the person with money and power.

Next, there is an economic revolution. Just think about the first Christians in Acts 2:44–45. No one went hungry in that first Christian community, because the rich sold their riches so the poor could have the basic necessities of life. That ideal community probably existed for

only a short time, but no Christians should go hungry while others have an abundance. We live in a very materialistic and greedy society, but Christians should have a different set of values than that of the world.

3. God's Faithfulness in Sending the Messiah (vv. 54–55)

Mary acknowledges that all these great and revolutionary changes in us can only come about through the coming of the Messiah that God had promised to send. Mary is thinking about God's promises to Abraham, Father of her people; but God promised Mother Eve back in Genesis 3:15 that He would send a Savior that we all so much need (see also Genesis 4:25). God is always faithful to keep His promises, even if we have to wait!

Search the Scriptures

1. What specific blessings does Mary thank God for (Luke 1:46–49)?
2. What sort of people does God bless (vv. 50–53)?
3. What attributes of God did Mary recite (vv. 50–55)?
4. How did God treat the descendants of Abraham (vv. 54–55)?

Discuss the Meaning

When Jesus was born, He brought blessings for individuals and for certain groups of people. What sort of people does Jesus favor? Why do you think He reaches out to those who fear Him, and to the poor, the humble, and the hungry? Compare these categories of people to the ones who are blessed in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12).

Liberating Lesson

Mary's song highlights the different set of values that emerged from the birth of Jesus. God is concerned for the people who are on the

bottom of society. In what ways can Christians as individuals bring about some of the things that Jesus came for? How can churches model His values?

Application for Activation

Some people are facing a difficult Christmas. Look around you and see if you can find someone to help before the day is over.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

Baltes, A.J., ed. Biblespeech.com. <http://www.biblespeech.com> (accessed August 11, 2010).

Cox, Steven L. "Angel." *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2003. 66-67.

Say It Correctly

Anakims. **AN**-uh-kims.

Chaldees. **KAL**-dees.

Debir. **DEE**-buhr.

Eleazar. El-ee-**AY**-zuhr.

Negev. **NEG**-ev.

Seir. **SEE**-uhr.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God Is Faithful

(2 Corinthians 1:18–22)

TUESDAY

A Faithful Heart

(Nehemiah 9:6–10)

WEDNESDAY

Descendants of Abraham

(Galatians 3:6–12)

THURSDAY

Inheritance through the Promise

(Galatians 3:13–18)

FRIDAY

Jesus' Birth Foretold

(Luke 1:26–38)

SATURDAY

Elizabeth's Blessing

(Luke 1:39–45)

SUNDAY

Mary's Song of Praise

(Luke 1:46–55)

Notes
