

“By faith . . .”

Elisabeth

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THE MOSAIC COVENANT is an overarching presence in Elisabeth’s story; before we know her name, Scripture says that she was a daughter of Aaron. Yet the Spirit of Christ, the spirit of faith, pervades the account of her life. Though Elisabeth and Zacharias’ ageing bodies symbolised the dying Mosaic covenant, the Law had led the priestly couple to Christ.

Elisabeth lived under Herod the king (Lk. 1:5), an indication that the Jews were in bondage, again, as a result of their faithlessness to Yahweh. Yet, in the hill country of Judea, most probably Hebron, Elisabeth was surrounded by reminders of faithful forebears. Here lay buried the early patriarchs, whose faith pre-dated that law to which she remained committed.

In her childlessness Elisabeth must have reflected on Sarah, who laughed at the idea of elderly motherhood (Gen.18:12); Rebekah, whose husband had entreated the Lord because of her barrenness (25:21); and Rachel, who in desperation said to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die” (30:1). On becoming pregnant Elisabeth said, “Thus hath the Lord dealt with me . . . to take away my reproach among men” (Lk. 1:25), indicating the sorrow her barrenness had brought.

When Gabriel announced to Zacharias that Elisabeth would become pregnant, he said, “thy prayer is heard” (v. 13). What prayer? Prayer for a child, or prayer that the redeemer of Israel might appear? In view of their faith, perhaps the “blameless” couple (v. 6) together had sought God’s mercy, requesting that they might be instruments in His redemption of lost Israel. In the face of amazing reality, though, Zacharias’s faith faltered.

Yet Elisabeth’s faith surely did not falter. As soon as her pregnancy was clear she hid herself away, avoiding ritual pollution, a faithful response to Gabriel’s command that the child was to be a Nazarite from the womb (v. 15; cf. Num. 6; Judg. 13:7,14). Elisabeth’s pregnancy, which otherwise would have been shared and wondered over with Zacharias, was, because of his dumbness, conducted by sign and symbol, a fitting reflection on the faltering Mosaic system.

Had Elisabeth’s faith been lacking, Gabriel would not have sent the young virgin, Mary, into

Judea’s hills to seek confirmation of his message to her (Lk. 1:34-37). “Blessed art thou among women” (v. 42) were Elisabeth’s first words to Mary as her own child leaped in her womb. No grudge here by an older woman, aware that a younger would have the highest honour of any in Israel. Further spirit-filled words resonate with understanding of her own position in relation to Mary: “whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (v. 43).

Whereas Mary knew of Elisabeth’s pregnancy before they met, the reverse was not the case. Elisabeth’s own pregnancy was to be God’s sign that Mary could have confidence in His prophecy about herself (v. 36). The three months the two women shared would have been faith-strengthening for both; and surely Elisabeth, the older of the two, would have given inestimable support to the younger, who, spiritually and mentally, had a considerable burden to bear in the months ahead.

At last the child of promise was born, joy and pain intermingling, for Elisabeth could not share with her husband their son’s first trembling cry, express her feelings, or know his, for he seems to have been deaf as well as dumb. Her faith must have been tested when her husband’s silence and inarticulation continued; would Zacharias ever be released? Family and friends had already decided on the newborn’s name, but Elisabeth showed her resolute faith in the angel’s words when she said, “he shall be called John” (v. 60). Zacharias, now sure of Gabriel’s promise, writes, not in a future tense, but in very certainty, “His name is John” (v. 63), and his faculties return. Elisabeth hears his voice for the first time in nine months; his spirit-filled utterance at this scene of their own son’s circumcision speaks not of their own, but of another son yet to be born (vv. 67-79).

Elisabeth’s faith clearly continued in the ensuing years. When John appeared in the wilderness of Judea (Mt. 3:1-4) his mother’s faithful role in rearing a Nazarite from the womb had come to fruition. More important, John understood his role in relation to Messiah: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jno. 3:30). As Jesus said, there had been no greater prophet than the child Elisabeth had faithfully nurtured (Lk. 7:28).