

# The Women of the Gospels

Missionaries of God's Love

Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan

the **WORD**  
among us®  
*press*

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# Welcome to The Word Among Us Keys to the Bible

**H**ave you ever lost your keys? Everyone seems to have at least one “lost keys” story to tell. Maybe you had to break a window of your house or wait for the auto club to let you into your car. Whatever you had to do probably cost you—in time, energy, money, or all three. Keys are definitely important items to have on hand!

The guides in *The Word Among Us Keys to the Bible* series are meant to provide you with a handy set of keys that can “unlock” the treasures of the Scriptures for you. Scripture is God’s living word. Within its pages we meet the Lord. So as we study and meditate on Scripture and unlock its many treasures, we discover the riches it contains—and in the process, we grow in intimacy with God.

Since 1982 *The Word Among Us* magazine has helped Catholics develop a deeper relationship with the Lord through daily meditations that bring the Scriptures to life. More than ever, Catholics today desire to read and pray with the Scriptures, and many have begun to form small faith-sharing groups to explore the Bible together.

We designed the *Keys to the Bible* series after conducting a survey among our magazine readers to learn what they wanted in a Catholic Bible study. We found that they were looking for easy-to-understand, faith-filled materials that approach Scripture from a clearly Catholic perspective. Moreover, they wanted a Bible study that shows them how they can apply what they learn from Scripture to their everyday lives. They also asked for sessions that they could complete in an hour or two.

Our goal was to design a simple, easy-to-use Bible study guide that is also challenging and thought provoking. We hope that this guide fulfills those admittedly ambitious goals. We are confident, however, that taking the time to go through this guide—whether by yourself, with a friend, or in a small group—will be a worthwhile endeavor that will bear fruit in your life.

## How to Use the Guides in This Series

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The study guides in the Keys to the Bible series are divided into six sessions that each deal with a particular aspect of the topic. Before starting the first session, take the time to read the introduction, which sets the stage for the sessions that follow.

Whether you use this guide for personal reflection and study, as part of a faith-sharing group, or as an aid in your prayer time, be sure to begin each session with prayer. Ask God to open his word to you and to speak to you personally. Read each Scripture passage slowly and carefully. Then take as much time as you need to meditate on the passage and pursue any thoughts it brings to mind. When you are ready, move on to the accompanying commentary, which offers various insights into the text.

Two sets of questions are included in each session to help you “mine” the Scripture passage and discover its relevance to your life. Those under the heading “Understand!” focus on the text itself and help you grasp what it means. Occasionally a question allows for a variety of answers and is meant to help you explore the passage from several angles. “Grow!” questions are intended to elicit a personal response by helping you examine your life in light of the values and truths that you uncover through your study of the Scripture passage and its setting. Under the headings “Reflect!” and “Act!” we offer suggestions to help you respond concretely to the challenges posed by the passage.

Finally, pertinent quotations from the Fathers of the Church as well as insights from contemporary writers appear throughout

each session. Coupled with relevant selections from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and information about the history, geography, and culture of first-century Palestine, these selections (called “In the Spotlight”) add new layers of understanding and insight to your study.

As is true with any learning resource, you will benefit the most from this study by writing your answers to the questions in the spaces provided. The simple act of writing can help you formulate your thoughts more clearly—and will also give you a record of your reflections and spiritual growth that you can return to in the future to see how much God has accomplished in your life. End your reading or study with a prayer thanking God for what you have learned—and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in living out the call you have been given as a Christian in the world today.

Although the Scripture passages to be studied and the related verses for your reflection are printed in full in each guide (from the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition), you will find it helpful to have a Bible on hand for looking up other passages and cross-references or for comparing different translations.

The format of the guides in *The Word Among Us Keys to the Bible* series is especially well suited for use in small groups. Some recommendations and practical tips for using this guide in a Bible discussion group are offered on pages 112–115.

We hope that this guide will unlock the meaning of the Scriptures for you. As you accompany these women on their journey of discipleship, may the Holy Spirit draw you closer to the heavenly Father, increase your love for him, and deepen your desire to follow Jesus as they did.

The Word Among Us Press



Trusting  
in God

# Luke 1:5-25, 39-45, 57-66

<sup>1:5</sup>In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

<sup>8</sup>Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup>Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup>Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him, “Do not

**M**ary of Nazareth presents herself at the threshold of Elizabeth and Zechariah’s house as the Mother of the Son of God. This is Elizabeth’s joyful discovery: “The mother of my Lord comes to me!”

—Pope John Paul II,  
*Redemptoris mater*, 13

be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

<sup>18</sup>Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” <sup>19</sup>The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup>But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

<sup>21</sup>Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. <sup>22</sup>When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup>When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

<sup>24</sup>After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, <sup>25</sup>“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.” . . .

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” . . .

<sup>57</sup>Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup>Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

<sup>59</sup>On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. <sup>60</sup>But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” <sup>61</sup>They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” <sup>62</sup>Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. <sup>63</sup>He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. <sup>64</sup>Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup>Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. <sup>66</sup>All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

**E**lizabeth was a woman of distinction, both because of her religious heritage and her own religious accomplishments. But it did not always seem so. Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were both from the priestly line of Aaron, brother of Moses. “Both of them were righteous” (1:6), Luke tells us—the only time a woman is described as such in the New Testament. This means that Elizabeth, no less than her husband, was faithful and scrupulous in her observance of the Torah. Yet Elizabeth was disgraced (1:25) because she was barren, and her hopes for having a child were dimmed by her advanced age. Without a son, a woman of those times was desolate and pitiable. However, despite her situation, Elizabeth continued to do what she became noted for: She trusted God.

While Zechariah took his turn to offer sacrifice in the Temple, Elizabeth endured more of the silence that seemed to be the only response to her prayers. Time was running out. When her husband came out at last from the sanctuary, mute and gesturing, Elizabeth must have wondered why God’s answer to her would finally come in such a mysterious way. Like Eve, Elizabeth learned of the Lord’s command from her husband, who had heard it more directly—Adam from the Lord, and Zechariah from the angel. But this time the woman would lead the way to fulfillment and grace. Elizabeth was quick to believe and exclaim, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (1:25).

**E**lizabeth  
was quick  
to believe.

In an appearance to Mary, the angel confirmed Elizabeth’s prayer of praise, adding, “Nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37). Only Luke connects Mary and Elizabeth as kinswomen. Yet their pregnancies linked the women as no simple familial ties of flesh and blood could have done. Luke reinterprets family as based on common faith. Like Elizabeth, Mary saw her pregnancy as a sign of God working wonders in her life. Mary’s response to God’s message announced by the angel was one of generous hospitality to others: Mary hastened

to join Elizabeth in grateful anticipation of the fulfillment of God's promises in their lives.

But more, both women proceed as prophets, that is, as people capable of interpreting God's will for themselves and others, and willing to act on it in their own lives. Mary "set out and went with haste" (1:39) to meet up with Elizabeth to celebrate their roles in God's plan. "With a loud cry," Elizabeth exclaims her faith in Mary's son, as she greets Mary as "mother of my Lord!" (1:42, 43). As if instructed by his mother, Elizabeth's child adds his own wordless echo, leaping for joy in recognition of the presence of the Lord among them. Her visit to Elizabeth is no mere act of human charity, for Mary withdraws just as Elizabeth is about to deliver her child, just when it would appear that Elizabeth would most need her kinswoman's physical and emotional support. Elizabeth and Mary's three-month visitation serves rather as a prophetic occasion to announce their solidarity with their sons for the salvation of all the world. They recognize the coming of the Messiah, and they rejoice because they have become instruments of God.

Elizabeth's child is born and named according to the angel's instruction to Zechariah, who must have somehow told Elizabeth, "He is to be called John" (1:60). Luke tells us no more of the satisfaction Elizabeth must have felt as all these things took place, even as she knew by faith that they would. Although Zechariah concludes the story of John's birth with a hymn of blessing, it is Elizabeth's strong and persevering faith that is conveyed. An awesome fear comes upon all the neighbors, who had previously doubted that Elizabeth's hopes would come to much or that she would conceive or that she was right in the naming of her son. Now they take the events that have happened through this woman to heart as they realize that "the hand of the Lord" (1:66) is with her as well as the child they must have thought she would never bear. And so, as the word spoken by the angel to Mary becomes flesh, Elizabeth recedes into the background, just as her son in turn will do when Jesus begins his own ministry.

# Understand!

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1. What are some of the ways Elizabeth takes a very active role in the shaping of this story?

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2. Why do you think Luke indicates a kinship between Elizabeth and Mary and, by implication, between John and Jesus? (see 1:36). By what means does Luke suggest the more important roles for Mary and for Jesus?

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3. Why does Luke describe the reaction of Elizabeth and Zechariah's neighbors and friends to the events? How do they add to the story? How do they show that these events are not just private between the two women but for everyone?

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4. In what ways does Elizabeth act and speak prophetically in this passage? How will her words come to fulfillment later on?

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5. List the various ways God communicates with people in this story. How does this compare with the way God communicates with Hannah in the story of the birth of the prophet Samuel (see 1 Samuel 1–2)? What other parallels between the two stories can you find?

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► **In the Spotlight**  
**The Problem of Barrenness**

Elizabeth joins a rather prestigious line of Old Testament heroic mothers who suffered a shaky start because of their infertility: Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel, to name a few. Considered as an anomaly of nature, barrenness was particularly problematic to a woman, because without children she actually had no future. It was also a cultural problem for the whole society, especially because religion was to be passed on from generation to generation. Ancient people had very little control over their world and felt themselves entirely dependent

upon God and God’s good will toward them in matters of life and death. Barrenness, like illness and even death itself, was considered a sign of God’s “disapproval” that could only be removed by God. Medicine was suspect, a pagan work combining magic, herbs, and incantations to powerless and lifeless deities. The pious Israelite directed prayers to God in the face of an illness or a condition such as infertility, expressing humble submission to God’s will. The miracle of God’s intervention was all that could be hoped for, because the poor and truly needy—an apt description of the barren woman—had no other recourse but to God.

## Grow!

1. Elizabeth appears to have felt disgrace because of her barrenness (see Luke 1:25). Have you ever felt disgrace by something that happened in your life, even if it wasn’t your fault? How did faith in God help you overcome those feelings?

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2. Elizabeth’s prayer recognizes Mary as “blessed among women” (Luke 1:42). In what ways do you count yourself blessed? What blessedness do you celebrate, and how do you do that?

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3. Elizabeth and Mary’s visitation was a generous human response to their common situation and also a prophetic act of faith. Can you recall a situation in your life when a human act of kindness appeared to have meaning and significance for you beyond the actual act? What lasting effect did this have?

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4. How is Elizabeth a model of strong and persevering faith? How did she exhibit trust in the Lord? How did she have the insight about Mary’s impending pregnancy?

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5. Elizabeth was a prophet—one who speaks on God’s behalf and interprets events in the light of God’s will. What situations in your life today call you to be a prophet? What obstacles, if any, prevent you from doing so?

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## ► In the Spotlight Scripture Celebrates God's Work in Our Lives

The example of Hannah (1 Samuel 1–2), with her copious tears and persistent prayer, illustrates the anguished cry of a woman desperate to conceive. But most important for us is Hannah's example of confidence and hope that God cared and would remedy her distress if asked. Similarly, Elizabeth is a woman of confidence and shows complete trust in God.

But it is Mary who turns the sentiments of Hannah and other Israelites into a model prayer for believers for all times. In her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), Mary sings of the reversals celebrated in God's kingdom: The mighty are thrown down and the lowly raised up, the rich are sent away empty and the hungry are given their fill. Mary gives voice to the amazement of the poor and the seemingly forgotten: God shows special tender care for them, attending to their every need and prayer. Elizabeth and Mary join their energies and their futures in unison, singing of all God has done for them and for countless others who, in their poverty and need, depend on God alone. In their encounter, we have an imitable example of how we can use the Scriptures to celebrate the works of God in our own lives. We join the company of men and women before us who lamented their loss and loneliness, expressed their hope in God, celebrated their faith and trust that God would take care of them, and praised God for allowing them to participate in the mystery of salvation.

# Reflect!

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1. Think about how you and your family or friends celebrate the birth of a child among you. What implications does this have for the family and community? What else can you do to express Christian hope and thanksgiving for the children of your family and church community?
2. The gospels offer believers a new way to think about children. Meditate on these words of Jesus to see how they change your own ideas:

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”  
(Mark 9:36-37)

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:3, 6)

“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.”  
(Matthew 18:10)

## ► In the Spotlight A Pregnant Creation

*Elizabeth comes to mind when we read Romans 8 in The Message, a paraphrased version of the Bible by Eugene Peterson, in which St. Paul says the following:*

I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. . . . All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's *within* us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

—Romans 8:18, 22-25, *The Message*

## Act!

To prepare for what is to come in your life, place yourself consciously in the presence of God, and picture yourself pregnant with joyous expectation and trust. Say the Serenity Prayer slowly as you ask for serenity, courage, and wisdom, today and every day:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things  
I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.

## ► In the Spotlight The Leap of Joy

*An excerpt from The Reed of God, by Caryl Chessman, a twentieth-century English Catholic writer:*

Many women, if they were expecting a child, would refuse to hurry over the hills on a visit of pure kindness. They would say they had a duty to themselves and to their unborn child which came before anything or anyone else.

The Mother of God considered no such thing. Elizabeth was going to have a child, too, and although Mary's own child was God, she could not forget Elizabeth's need—almost incredible to us, but characteristic of her.

She greeted her cousin Elizabeth, and at the sound of her voice, John quickened in his mother's womb and leapt for joy.

"I am come," said Christ, "that they may have life and may have it more abundantly." Even before He was born His presence gave life.

With what piercing shoots of joy does this story of Christ unfold! First the conception of a child in a child's heart, and then this first salutation, an infant leaping for joy in his mother's womb, knowing the hidden Christ and leaping into life.

How did Elizabeth herself know what had happened to Our Lady? What made her realize that this little cousin who was so familiar to her was the mother of her God?

She knew it by the child within herself, by the quickening into life which was a leap of joy.

If we practice this contemplation taught and shown to us by Our Lady, we will find that our experience is like hers.

If Christ is growing in us, if we are at peace, recollected, because we know that however insignificant our life seems to be, from it He is forming Himself; if we go with eager wills, “in haste,” to wherever our circumstances compel us, because we believe that He desires to be in that place, we shall find that we are driven more and more to act on the impulse of His love.

And the answer we shall get from others to those impulses will be an awakening into life, or the leap into joy of the already wakened life within them.

—Caryll Houselander, *The Reed of God*