

Amy: Welcome to A Word Fitly Spoken, a podcast about Jesus, His Word, and our joy in following Him. I'm Amy Spreeman.

Michelle: And I'm Michelle Lesley. Merry Christmas! Amy, do you have all your shopping done, your menus planned, your home all decorated?

Amy: *answers*

Banter

Michelle: Sometimes it can feel like there's so much that we, as women, have to do to get ready for Christmas. We set the tone, and we play a major part in how Christmas unfolds. And so did the very first women of Christmas. The biblical story of Jesus' birth would look and sound - and *be* - very different without the important role godly women played in welcoming our incarnate Savior to earth.

Amy: Indeed it would, Michelle. So tonight, we're going to open up our Bibles to the book of Luke, chapters 1 and 2, to take a look at the women of the very first Christmas story: Elizabeth, Anna, and Mary. And we don't just want to look at them as characters in the story of Jesus' birth, we want to examine their godly characteristics that **led** to the part they played in that story, and how they each set an example of godliness for us as Christian women today.

Let's start with Elizabeth.

Michelle: Amy, sometimes I think that if Elizabeth's story had happened back in the Old Testament, or at least separate from the story of Jesus' birth, we'd spend much more time on it than we do and be much more amazed by it than we are. Instead, we kind of tend to regard her as a footnote in the Christmas story, overshadowed by the story of Jesus' incarnation.

And I'm sure Elizabeth is totally fine with that. Like her own son, John the Baptist, said, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

But Elizabeth's story is a rich gift to Christ's birth narrative. It adds so much wonder and awe to the divine beauty of the account. It is also God's gift to us as Christian women, giving us a sister in Christ to look up to and learn from.

Amy: Yes, and let's start by reading the first part of Elizabeth's story. This is Luke 1:5-7 if you'd like to follow along, ladies:

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Elizabeth was righteous before God. She walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. Like you and me, she wasn't perfect. She still fell into sin. But because she loved the Lord, she repented, and strove to live her life to please Him.

But Elizabeth also knew sorrow. She and Zechariah had no children. She had been barren for all of her childbearing years, and now she was elderly – some scholars estimate at least 60 years old – and long past menopause.

Michelle: And ladies, if you or someone you know has ever experienced the heartbreak of infertility, you know just how painful that is. And in biblical times, culture added insult to injury in a lot of ways.

- It was assumed any infertility was a problem with the woman, when today we know that men can also be infertile.
- Because children are a blessing from the Lord and the fruit of the womb is a reward, and because God sometimes closed the wombs of certain women in Scripture as a result of sin – it was often assumed that if you weren't having children you were cursed by God, or your barrenness was some sort of punishment for sin.

Amy: So, practically the only way women of that time could achieve a modicum of respect and status in society was by marrying well and by having sons. And, though she did marry well, Elizabeth didn't have any children.

Try to imagine being a woman of Elizabeth's time, having all of that on your shoulders, and having virtually no power to do anything about it. Do you think you might be a little bitter toward God?

Michelle: Amy, I can only imagine what my prayer life might have been like if I had been Elizabeth:

"Lord, my husband's a priest! We can't go around having people think you've cursed us."

"We've been serving You all these years, and all we've asked for is a baby. You owe us."

"You're not going to give me the one thing I want most in life? Forget it – there are plenty of other gods to worship. I'll go serve one of them."

But not Elizabeth. Elizabeth just kept getting up day after day, trusting the Lord, serving the Lord, obeying the Lord.

Amy: And let's not forget, **we** know the rest of the story. **We** know God is going to miraculously open Elizabeth's womb and she'll be the mother of John the Baptist. **We** know she's going to be one of the first people to learn the good news of the Messiah. **We** know she's going to be celebrated and famous across the world once her story gets into Scripture.

Elizabeth didn't know any of that. All those years faithfully following and trusting the Lord, she had no idea what the future held. For all she knew, she was going to die childless and in obscurity, quickly to be forgotten even by those who knew her. And yet she still chose to walk faithfully with the Lord.

Elizabeth was faithful to God because of who God **is**, not for what she could get out of Him. She served God to get more of **God**, not to get the goodies.

Michelle: That's right, Amy. But look what happens next in Elizabeth's story. Let's read Luke 1:8-9, 11, 13:

Now while [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense...And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense...the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

Zechariah has the great honor of entering the temple and burning incense. Suddenly – a miracle happens! Gabriel, who stands in the very presence of God Himself, has brought the amazing news that Elizabeth – barren and past her time – is going to give birth to the forerunner of the Messiah. And Zechariah doesn't believe it.

But Elizabeth **does**.

"Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." she says in verse 25.

Elizabeth **believed** God.

Amy: Yes she did! And look what happened next in verses 39-45:

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

The newly pregnant Mary comes to Elizabeth's house for a visit, and the Holy Spirit reveals to - and through - Elizabeth that the baby Mary is carrying is the Messiah. And, once again, in great humility, Elizabeth **believes** Him: "Who am I, that my Lord should come to me?" Elizabeth wondered.

Indeed – who are any of us, that our Lord should come to us?

Elizabeth did not seek out Jesus. *He* came to find *her*. In the same way, we, who were dead in our sins and trespasses, did not seek Him. He came to us, to seek and to save that which was lost.

Michelle: Yes, praise God for that! Let's see what happened next in Elizabeth's amazing story in verses 57-60:

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John."

It's a boy! What a joy-filled day it must have been. This wasn't just any birth. It was God's promise fulfilled. It was God's mercy to Elizabeth, His blameless – yet not sinless – and undeserving child. It was God's blessing to Elizabeth, His faithful servant. The same kind of mercy and blessings He shows us, His faithful, yet undeserving daughters. The same way He fulfills His promises to us.

The time quickly came to circumcise and officially name the baby. Tradition dictated that he be named after Dad: Zechariah. But Elizabeth **believed** all that God had revealed about this baby to the point that she put her foot down, broke with tradition and insisted, along with her husband, that the baby be named John. It wasn't about what she wanted. It wasn't about what others thought was best. It was all about God, and what He wanted.

Amy: All of these **unbelievable** things happened to Elizabeth, yet Elizabeth **believed** God. Obeyed God. Trusted God. She trusted and obeyed God all of those years when He said no, and she believed and obeyed Him after He said yes.

What a legacy this dear sister has left us. May God help each one of us to follow her example: Believing God through the unbelievable. Trusting Him in times of uncertainty. Obeying Him in the face of opposition.

Next, let's move on to Anna's story. Remember Anna? She's one of our often overlooked sisters from Scripture. As with Elizabeth, we don't usually hear much about Anna, except sometimes, once a year, at Christmas.

When Jesus was about a month old, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple to fulfill the requirement of the Levitical law of purification. And that's where they encountered Anna.

Michelle: That's right, and just to clarify for our listeners, the purification ceremony where we meet Anna was completely separate from Jesus' circumcision ceremony.

Circumcision took place when the baby was eight days old, probably in the parents' home or possibly in the local synagogue (the synagogue was sort of a "branch campus" of the temple in towns that were outside of Jerusalem). Mary would not have been able to enter the synagogue in

Bethlehem or the temple in Jerusalem for Jesus' circumcision since she would still have been ceremonially unclean from His birth.

The purification ceremony that made her ritually clean again took place when Jesus was 33 days old at the temple in Jerusalem. A sacrifice was offered for Mary's cleansing and Jesus was dedicated to the Lord.

Amy: And listeners, if you'd like to study more about the purification ceremony, you can find all the details in Leviticus 12.

We hear the Luke 2 account of Jesus' birth every year, and sometimes, we can tend to let it wash over us without really thinking about it. And Luke 2 presents all of these events in kind of a machine gun fashion so it can practically feel like everything in that chapter is happening on the same day, and we can conflate things we shouldn't. For example, many people think that Simeon and Anna were married to each other just because their stories appear back to back in Luke 2. As we're about to see, that wasn't the case.

Let's take a look at Anna's story, starting with Luke 2:36-38:

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour (in other words, at the time of the purification ceremony) she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Michelle: Anna had a lot of strikes against her in life:

First, she was a woman. In Anna's day, women were "low man on the totem pole" so to speak. They were regarded as less than men in practically every way- intelligence, abilities, worth, and so on. They couldn't testify in court because their testimony wasn't considered credible. And, maybe you've even heard of the daily prayer that Jewish men still say today, thanking God for not creating them a gentile...a slave...or a woman.

Second, she was a widow, and possibly childless. A woman of that time without a husband or grown children to take care of her would have been in very real danger of poverty.

Finally, she was old. Average life expectancy in Anna's day was 55. She was 84. When you're 84 in ancient times with no modern medicine, you're feeling it.

Amy: That's right. Anna was a woman, she was a widow, and she was old. She had some disadvantages. But Anna didn't let those things stop her from serving the Lord full throttle. In fact, she took some of those supposed disadvantages and put them to work for her.

If Anna had had a husband to care for or children to raise, she wouldn't have had the time or the energy to serve the Lord full time. And she wouldn't have had the opportunity either, because no one in that culture would have thought it was appropriate for a woman with a husband and children to abandon them to stay in the temple.

Also, in a culture that respected its elderly, it's likely that more people – especially younger women – would have listened to her, than if she had not been so advanced in years.

So Anna turned these disadvantages into opportunities. And what did she do with those opportunities? She used them to serve God and to tell people about Jesus.

And that's what the Christian life is all about – serving God and telling others about Jesus – whatever your station in life.

Michelle: Yes. Maybe you're single like Anna, and God has blessed you with the time and freedom to serve Him full time – or at least fuller time than you'd otherwise be able to.

Maybe you do have a husband and children- and God has given you the opportunity to serve Him by serving them: pouring the gospel into your children, being a godly helpmate to your husband, and being a faithful, serving member of your church.

Maybe you're older, and instead of using your golden years for travel or hobbies or shopping, God is leading you to teach younger women or throw yourself into ministry in some way.

Anna's example to us is to bloom wherever God has currently planted us and grab hold of every opportunity to serve Him and tell others about Jesus.

Amy: And finally, let's take a look at our sister, Mary. Her story begins in Luke 1:26-31

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Michelle: Mary was just an average, godly young woman, probably in her teens. She had kept herself sexually pure, and she had submitted herself to what was, undoubtedly, her parents' choice of a husband for her.

Twice in this passage, Gabriel tells Mary she is "favored" by God. This is the same Greek word translated as "blessed" in Ephesians 1:6:

*In love, 5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious **grace**, with which he has **blessed** us in the Beloved.*

God blesses us by bestowing His grace upon us to bring us to the Savior, Jesus - for His own reasons, not based on any merit of our own. And God blessed, graced, and favored Mary to bring the Savior, Jesus, to her. For His own reasons, not based on any merit of her own.

Amy: And as incomprehensible to Mary as this news was, her response was not, "No, this **can't** be," but, "How **will** this be?". Like Elizabeth before her, Mary believed God.

But even as she believed God's word to her, she must have had a million fears and questions: Would Joseph believe her? Would her parents believe her? Would **anyone** believe her?

In that time, Old Testament law demanded that women be stoned to death for adultery, and for the average Israelite to believe a far fetched story -from a *woman*, no less- about her child being conceived by the Holy Spirit, well, that must have seemed about as likely to Mary as the virgin birth itself.

Maybe she feared for her life and her safety, but Mary still believed what God said and submitted herself completely to Him: "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

"I am Your slave, Lord. I'm at Your mercy, to do with as You will. Do whatever You want with me, to me, in me, and through me." This should always be the prayer of every godly woman.

Michelle: Next, starting with verse 41, God sends Mary to visit Elizabeth.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

In addition to finding a safe place to hide out from those who might seek to put her to death, Mary needed some good, old fashioned Titus 2 discipleship from a godly older woman. And just look at Elizabeth's godliness!

Amy: That's right, Michelle. Elizabeth could have been jealous of Mary. She could have bitterly rehashed all those years begging God for a child, and here, God just showed up and gave Mary a child without her even asking! And not just a child, but the Messiah. **Mary** got that honor, not her. That *could* have been Elizabeth's attitude. But was it? Not a chance.

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She was humble and honored that Mary would come to visit. She was joyful, and she blessed Mary. And most importantly, she reassured Mary with the

truth of the word of God. Her words lined up with God's word spoken to Mary by the angel:

- Blessed are you among women
- Blessed is the fruit of your womb
- You are the mother of my Lord.

"And blessed is **she who believed** that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Yet again, Elizabeth is such a wonderful example to us of how mature, godly women should think and behave. She shows us how to disciple younger women in kindness, humility, and joy, using Scripture and our God-given wisdom born of the experiences He has brought us through. And she and Mary both showcase the beauty of believing God even in the midst of unbelievable circumstances.

Michelle: And look at this amazing picture God paints for us in the next passage, contrasting the beauty of Elizabeth's spiritual maturity and wisdom with Mary's youthful innocence, awe, and wonder in worship:

Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

This is personal. **My** soul, **my** spirit, **my** Savior. All generations will call **me** blessed. He has done great things for **me**. We can sometimes regard Mary as merely a conduit for bringing **our** Savior to **us**. But this was **her** life.

God sees us and knows us as His unique, one of a kind daughters, and He is our **personal** Father. Just as it was right and fitting for Mary to have this intimate moment worshipping her Father for what He had done in her life, and giving him all the glory, it is right and fitting for us to worship Him in quiet moments all alone, giving Him all the glory for what He has done in our lives.

Amy: But Mary knew that all of this wasn't **just** about her, and as she continues to worship she expands her thoughts to include others:

50 And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

In this brief song of worship, Mary quotes from - or alludes to - several passages in Psalms, Isaiah, Habakkuk, and other Old Testament books. She knows who God is and what He has done for His people. She understands His nature and character. She knows His precepts, promises, and covenants. Mary was a woman of godly character, because she was a woman of the Word.

Michelle: What a godly example our sister Mary set for us - and Anna and Elizabeth, too. May God make us all worshipful women of the Word, like Mary - tenaciously believing God like Elizabeth, and tirelessly serving God like Anna.

Ladies, we've just briefly touched on the godly character of each of these sisters, but we would encourage you, this Christmas season, to get out your Bibles, turn to Luke 1 and 2, and study these sisters more. How did each of them set a godly example for you, and how can you follow that example in your own life?

Amy: And as we wrap things up for this episode of AWFS, we wanted to say a big thank you to KentuckyFan who left us a 5 star rating on Apple podcasts along with this encouraging comment:

Thank you!

I'm newer to reformed teaching, and initially when I started listening to AWFS I was offended sometimes. I have come to love this podcast and realize that much of my offense was rooted in wrong teachings that I believed. This podcast is so edifying. If you're offended- seek the word of God and pray. You might find yourself like me, coming back to this podcast and realizing that you were actually wrong. As a mother who grew up motherless, this is such an encouraging podcast.

Thanks, KentuckyFan!

Michelle: Yes, thank you! And listeners, if you love this program, we want to encourage you to leave us a 5 star rating and an encouraging review just like KentuckyFan did, and share our episodes around on social media too.

We're not asking you to do this to pump up our egos or anything like that, we're asking you to do it because there are women just like you out there all over the world who aren't being taught sound doctrine and biblical womanhood.

And because of the way social media and podcasts and all of those things work, the more you like, share, and review, the closer to the top of the list we are when people start looking for Christian podcasts.

Amy: Also, don't forget to stop by our website, AWFS.Life, and check out our "speaking" tab. Michelle and I would love to come and speak at your church's next women's event! Or maybe you know of a doctrinally sound conference that needs speakers for women's breakout sessions, or a women's event that needs speakers. We would be so honored if you would recommend us.

And until next time, let's follow the godly example of our sisters from Scripture, and walk worthy.