



# Walking with Gospel Women

INTERACTIVE BIBLE MEDITATIONS

FIONA STRATTA

Text copyright © Fiona Stratta 2012  
The author asserts the moral right  
to be identified as the author of this work

**Published by**  
**The Bible Reading Fellowship**

15 The Chambers, Vineyard  
Abingdon OX14 3FE  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700  
Email: [enquiries@brf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@brf.org.uk)  
Website: [www.brf.org.uk](http://www.brf.org.uk)  
BRF is a Registered Charity

**ISBN 978 0 8574 601 0**

**First published 2012**

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0  
All rights reserved

**Acknowledgments**

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, a member of the Hachette Livre UK Group. All rights reserved.

The Living Bible copyright © 1971 by Tyndale House Publishers.

Scripture quotations from *THE MESSAGE*. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Scripture quotations from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, are used by permission. All rights reserved.

The paper used in the production of this publication was supplied by mills that source their raw materials from sustainably managed forests. Soy-based inks were used in its printing and the laminate film is biodegradable.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed in Singapore by Craft Print International Ltd



# Contents

Introduction .....	7
Elizabeth.....	10
Mary: the annunciation.....	18
Mary's visit to Elizabeth .....	23
Mary and the birth of Christ.....	28
Anna the prophetess .....	35
Mary and the child Jesus.....	42
Mary and the twelve-year-old Jesus.....	49
Jesus and Mary at the wedding in Cana .....	57
Jesus and the Samaritan woman .....	62
Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law .....	67
Jesus and the prostitute.....	75
Jesus and the widow of Nain .....	81
Jesus and the crippled woman.....	84
Jesus and the Gentile woman of faith.....	89
Jesus and the woman who dared to touch his robe .....	94
Jesus and the woman caught in adultery.....	99
Salome, mother of James and John .....	105

Jesus' visit to Bethany: Martha.....	113
Jesus' visit to Bethany: Mary.....	118
Jesus and Martha at the raising of Lazarus (Part 1) .....	122
Jesus and Martha at the raising of Lazarus (Part 2) .....	128
Jesus anointed at Bethany by Mary .....	136
Jesus watches the widow give all that she has .....	140
Mary's journey of suffering (Part 1).....	145
Mary's journey of suffering (Part 2).....	153
Jesus and Mary Magdalene .....	158
Notes.....	168



## Introduction

The following monologues and studies are based on the biblical accounts of women found in the Gospels and are intended for groups of women who meet together in order to grow in their relationships with God and each other. The group should first read the Bible passage about the woman to be studied, followed by the monologue, which is written as if the woman herself is speaking.

There are several types of Christian meditation, one of which is to ‘enter’ the scripture using the imagination. Imaginative reflection on the Bible is not a new concept; it was practised by St Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century.

Emilie Griffin wrote:

Meditation is... a work of the graced imagination. Understand first that imagination is one of God’s great gifts to us and has a vital place in the spiritual life. Meditation allows us to put godly imagination into play in such a way that our faith feels more alive. Often this practice allows Scripture to work in us more effectively.<sup>1</sup>

Imaginative meditation can be a refreshing and powerful way for God to speak to us, for it involves not only the mind but also the emotions. Jesus himself used imaginative narrative in the form of parables to engage with his listeners and hence to teach them effectively. In these studies we are to cast ourselves as the women in the Gospel episodes.

Of course, not everything in the monologues will be true. After all, we are imagining, filling in the gaps with possibilities. This need not be a problem, for it is precisely what we do

when we tell Bible stories to children: we embellish the story to capture the child's imagination, with the purpose of teaching them spiritual truths. This is exactly what we are doing here.

Points for reflection and discussion follow the monologues, enabling issues to be explored and spiritual growth to take place. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever'<sup>2</sup> and so each reflection and discussion ends by considering how the study has contributed to our growing relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Finally, there is the opportunity to record what God has been saying to us and the implications for our individual spiritual journeys. After all, in coming to God's word, we want not only to learn but also to change and to grow, so that we are 'doers of the word, and not merely hearers' (James 1:22, NRSV).

The monologues can be used in groups without the discussion element as a means of initiating a time of silent personal reflection or led meditation. The monologues can also stand alone effectively in many other contexts: for example, individuals can use them in private meditation or the monologues can be read to larger groups such as congregations.

## The facilitator

You will need to ensure that pens and paper and a variety of translations and paraphrases of the Bible are available for the group. For the longer studies, you may need to select the passages to be read and the questions to be discussed.

It will be your responsibility to introduce the study and to find someone to read the monologue. Try to ask someone who is able to read aloud fluently and expressively.

You will need to read out the links and facilitate the discussion, allowing enough time for personal reflection at the end. It may be helpful to play quiet music while this last part is happening.



# Elizabeth

## Introduction

---

- Read Luke 1:5–25, 39–45 and 57–80. The first two references could be read before the monologue and the final one afterwards.
  - Ask God to speak to you through this episode. You could use the words from Psalm 119:18: ‘Open my eyes to see wonderful things in your Word’ (LB).
  - Sit back, relax and close your eyes. Imagine the scene as someone reads out the monologue.
- 

## Monologue

Zechariah had been gone for a week and I was expecting him home that day. My husband was a member of the priestly family of Abijah and had gone to Jerusalem to fulfil his week of duty at the temple. It was such an important week, for Zechariah was meticulous in his obedience to the Lord’s commands and regulations and he found great satisfaction in his priestly responsibilities. He would be tired after his journey back to the hill country of Judea where we lived, for we were elderly now and the spell of temple service took its toll on him. I went to the doorway from time to time to look out for him. At last there he was, walking toward me, but to my astonishment his walk was brisk and his face animated. I welcomed him but he made no reply as he took me into his arms and smiled broadly.

As we entered our home I started to ply him with questions: How had it been? Who had he seen? What was the news from Jerusalem? Who had been chosen to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to burn the incense on behalf of the people?

Still silence from my husband and still that smile, and when I looked into his eyes there was an expression that I had never seen before. I couldn't make it out. My questions dried up and my excitement was replaced with concern. I couldn't get a word out of him! What was the matter? Zechariah was scanning the room, looking for something. Then his eyes fell on the writing tablet and, with a look of relief, he walked over and brought it back to where I stood. He drew me to his side and wrote the words, 'We will have a son and we will call him John.'

I sat down with a thump. What was happening? Had he gone mad? We were old, we were childless—a great pain to us both—and now I was well past the age of conceiving a baby.

Slowly and painstakingly the story began to unfold. With a trembling hand Zechariah continued to write and I tried to interpret what had happened, while he nodded or shook his head. This is what I pieced together.

My husband had been chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary to burn incense while the crowd stayed outside, praying. In the sanctuary the angel Gabriel had appeared to him, giving him the momentous message that we were to have a son and his name was to be John. He would be a joy and delight to us, his birth would cause many to rejoice and he would be great in the eyes of the Lord. From his very birth he would be filled with the Holy Spirit and be consecrated to God: he was set aside for a special purpose. He would bring people back to

the Lord, turning them round from disobedience to righteous living and preparing them for the coming of the Lord. Our son would have the spirit and power of Elijah!

God was once again moving in Israel. After years of waiting and seeming silence, the promise made through the prophet Malachi was going to be fulfilled: 'Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord arrives. His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers.'<sup>3</sup>

There were two things we had longed for, had prayed for, all our lives: to have a child and for the coming of the Redeemer of Israel. Yet when an angel was sent to tell Zechariah that our longings were to be fulfilled, he could not believe it. I couldn't blame him, for this was beyond anything we had imagined. So Zechariah had been struck dumb, had been unable to say those words that the people were longing to hear when he came out of the sanctuary: 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.'<sup>4</sup>

My husband had signed to them and the people had realised that he'd seen a vision. How hard it had been for him to complete his duties, for he was longing to return to me. But in the quietness his hope and faith had grown, and by the time I saw him there was not a flicker of doubt in his eyes. I believed.

Zechariah's love-making was tender that night and I knew, before there was any indication, that I was pregnant. For five months I remained secluded, preparing myself to be the mother of this man of God. I thought of his name, John: 'the Lord is gracious'. That was God's message to us and to all his people, the message that our son would take to them. How carefully we must prepare him for his role.

In the sixth month of my pregnancy I was absorbed in sweeping the house when I heard the simple words, 'Hello, Elizabeth.'

Oh! My son leapt within my womb. I turned and there was my young cousin, Mary. I knew immediately, without her uttering a further word. I knew that she was pregnant and I knew that the baby she carried was the Chosen One. God's Spirit so filled me that I could not but call out, 'You are blessed among women! Blessed too is the child you will bear! I am so favoured that the mother of the Lord should visit me. As soon as you called my name, my baby leapt for joy. You are blessed for believing that the Lord will accomplish what he has promised.'

I listened as Mary praised God, as her beautiful words filled our home: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'<sup>5</sup>

Mary spent three months with me. We had much to share and we drew much strength from this time together. I helped her through those early weeks of pregnancy and she helped me with practical matters in the home as I became more fatigued. I was sad to see her go, but return to her home she must and I must prepare myself for the birth.

It was both the most difficult and the most joyful day of my life, giving birth to my son. I remember the delight of holding him in my arms and seeing Zechariah's pride and pleasure. Our joy was increased by our family and friends, who rejoiced with us and joined us for the circumcision and naming on the eighth day of our son's life.

During the ceremony I realised that the rabbi was referring to our son as Zechariah. 'No!' I interrupted. 'His name is to be John.'

Everyone looked at me in great surprise. 'But no one in

your family has the name John,' they argued. I looked at Zechariah and a writing tablet was brought to him. Silence fell on the crowd as he wrote, 'His name is John.'

As soon as he held this up for all to see, my husband began to speak. The Spirit of God filled him and he spoke words of praise and prophecy for everyone to hear, words from the scriptures that we were familiar with and loved to hear, for they promised us a future. This time was different, though, for now the words spoke of the present and not of a time to come: 'He has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us... You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High.'<sup>6</sup>

I looked around the faces of our friends and family as they listened to Zechariah; they were full of wonder. As they left, I heard them talking quietly to each other about the future of our son. Was not the Lord's hand on him in a special way?

## Reflection and discussion

- Did any words or phrases stand out for you? Before further discussion, read some or all of the passages again in a different translation or paraphrase of the Bible.
- Zechariah and Elizabeth lived faithfully in spite of ongoing difficult circumstances and heartache. The Bible passage states that they were 'righteous in God's eyes' (v. 6). How can we live faithfully and with integrity in challenging circumstances?
- From a human perspective, it is easy to understand Zechariah's doubts. We can fall into the trap of trusting in our own reason and logic rather than in God. The experiences that we have had, especially bad ones, can limit our ability to expect great things from God in the future and can

cause us to live in a less hopeful and more cynical way. They can take away the song from our hearts. Share experiences of this loss of hopefulness.

- Cynical unbelief is seen as a very serious condition in this passage: not only was the song taken from Zechariah's heart but he was also dumb for nine months. Our faith and trust may seem inadequate but we are assured that we need only have faith the size of a mustard seed to do great things in God's name (Matthew 17:20–21). Share times when you have seen God at work although your faith at that moment was small.
- Elizabeth had carried a great burden because of the false beliefs about childlessness held at that time and the unhelpful attitudes of the people around her. We can be burdened by false pictures of God or ideas about Christian living that have been passed down to us, or we may unwittingly burden others. Share your experiences of this.
- Elizabeth's life of humiliation was to be changed to one of great blessing, for John was to be a joy and delight to her. We read in Romans 8:28, 'And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.' Share how God has done this in your lives. Are there painful areas in your lives from which you would like God to bring good? You may feel unable to share them openly but it may be helpful to write them down in your personal reflections at the end of the session.
- Jesus would later refer to John as the greatest of all children born to women (Luke 7:28). The story of Elizabeth encourages us never to lose hope: God will sometimes surprise us with his intervention. Are there times in your

life when God has intervened in surprising and wonderful ways?

- ‘Elizabeth became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months’ (Luke 1:24). Quietness can provide a time for spiritual growth; the noise around us can block our receptivity to God and to what he is saying. For this reason many Christians build quiet days and/or silent retreats into their schedules. If this sounds daunting, start with a couple of hours. Those in the group who have experienced such times of quietness could share the value gained from seeking silence.
- Elizabeth describes Mary as blessed for believing God’s promises. We can live in deep peace in all kinds of situations as we learn to live with the simple trust that God is in control and will fulfil his promises to us. Share times when holding on to a biblical promise has given you peace.
- Zechariah was unable to say this blessing when he came out of the sanctuary: ‘The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace’ (Numbers 6:24–26, NIV). It is a wonderful blessing to pray over and for those we know and love. Say this blessing to each other at the end of your time together.
- John, Elizabeth and Zechariah are all described in these passages as filled with the Holy Spirit. What have you learnt of the work of the Holy Spirit through this study?

## Conclusion

Take time to pray through your findings. What might God be saying to you? Is anything particularly relevant to your life

at the moment? Write down what you have learnt and refer back to it regularly in the days ahead so that it becomes part of your thinking, reacting and lifestyle.



# Mary: the annunciation

## Introduction

---

- Read Luke 1:26–38.
  - Ask God to speak to you through this episode. You could use the words from Psalm 119:27: ‘Help me understand these things inside and out so I can ponder your miracle-wonders’ (*THE MESSAGE*).
  - Sit back, relax and close your eyes. Imagine the scene as someone reads out the monologue.
- 

## Monologue

A constant song seemed to fill my heart in those days, one of great happiness. I was a young woman with so much to look forward to, for I was recently betrothed to a fine man, Joseph, a descendant of David. Joseph was a carpenter and whenever he had a spare moment he would work on building a home for us; I watched his progress with delight. One day I remember asking him what he thought about as he worked, and he had answered quite simply, ‘I pray.’

As I walked to collect water from the well in Nazareth, I would daydream, imagining our wedding celebrations, our life together, the children I would bear. How happy I would be! I, too, prayed as I worked, asking that God would be my strength, that I would be a good wife and a loving mother, bringing up my children in the ways of the Lord. I thanked God for Joseph and asked God to bless our life together. In my heart I would repeat words from the psalm:

'Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart... I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you... I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.'<sup>7</sup>

It was a day like any other and I was humming to myself when I entered the house. It would usually take a few moments for my eyes to adapt to the dark interior after the bright sunshine outside, but that day it was brighter within, intensely bright. I put the waterpot down and instinctively covered my eyes with my hands. I sensed the light getting closer to me and felt a strange warmth course through my body. Then I heard a voice and, in fear, I fell to the ground.

'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

Who was this speaking to me? Why these words? I was finding it difficult to breathe, my hands trembled violently and my body shook. The beautifully resonant voice spoke again: 'I am Gabriel, sent by God. Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son. You are to give him the name Jesus.'

The realisation swept over me: this was a heavenly being before me, an angel of the Lord. My trembling hands fell away from my face, my fear started to subside and into its place seeped a deep awe. There was a long silence, and the warmth and light seemed to penetrate my very soul. The quietness was broken by the words, 'He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.'<sup>8</sup>

'How can this be?' I faltered. 'I have never slept with a man.'

'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'<sup>9</sup>

Light and warmth hovered around me, shone over me, washed me, pierced me, softened me and opened me to receive these promises.

The angel spoke again: 'Even your relative, Elizabeth, has conceived in her old age and is now six months pregnant. For nothing is impossible with God.'

'I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true,'<sup>10</sup> I responded. Darkness descended as the light faded and I was left alone.

## Reflection and discussion

- Did any words or phrases stand out for you? Before further discussion, read the passage again in a different translation or paraphrase of the Bible.
- In the monologue, Mary and Joseph both prayed as they worked. The 17th-century monk, Brother Lawrence, who worked in a busy kitchen, learnt to 'practise the presence of God' while at work. How could we build an awareness of God's presence into our daily lives?
- The words that Mary is imagined to meditate on come from Psalm 119:1–2, 11 and 14–16 (NIV). In verse 11 we read the words, 'I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.' How can we 'hide' God's word in our hearts?
- Angels are God's messengers and appear on many occasions during the Christmas story, as well as elsewhere in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Encounters with

angels have continued throughout history to the modern day. Which angel appearances to humans can you recall from the Bible?

- Sometimes angels are sent to give a specific message from God, and on other occasions they come to give protection. What historical or modern-day stories of angels have you heard? We are told that these messengers of God will not necessarily take on an angelic countenance: ‘Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realising it!’ (Hebrews 13:2).
- Mary was open to receive from God, as her final words illustrate: ‘I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true’ (Luke 1:38). Jesus spoke of people having hard hearts that prevented them from receiving and responding to his word. We are warned against this in Hebrews 3:7–8: ‘The Holy Spirit says, “Today when you hear his voice, don’t harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled, when they tested me in the wilderness”.’ Our hearts can become hardened so that we do not respond in compassion to people, hardened so that we see no other doctrinal view but our own and hardened so that we do not see God’s blessing in our lives. Share other ways in which our hearts can become hardened and give specific examples where possible. We need to pray daily for softened hearts so that we can respond to the Spirit of God.
- Mary was told that the Holy Spirit would come upon her. Luke recognises the work of the Holy Spirit throughout his accounts of the life of Jesus and of the early church. Mary would need the indwelling Spirit to sustain her and

give her wisdom in all that lay ahead. Jesus likens the Holy Spirit to the wind (John 3:5–8). The wind can be the most gentle and refreshing of breezes or a powerful gale. In the same way, our experiences of the Holy Spirit’s activity can vary greatly. Give examples from your own lives.

- The angel told Mary that nothing is impossible with God. Share times when God has worked in seemingly impossible circumstances in your life or in the lives of people you know. You may have ‘impossible’ situations that you are dealing with at the moment. If you are able, share them with the group, and bring them to God in your time of individual reflection at the end.
- At the end of this episode, the angel leaves Mary. Our times of revelation and insight, deep fellowship and joyful celebration are wonderful but are not continuous. The Bible tells us that Mary ‘treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart’ (Luke 2:19, NIV). It is likely that the memory of this event and the confirmation from Elizabeth helped to sustain her. Share how you have been sustained in difficult times by the memory of God’s blessings.
- ‘The Lord is with you!’ (Luke 1:28). This message is at the heart of the Christmas story. These words to Mary are also God’s words to us. How does this affect our relationship with God?

## Conclusion

Take time to pray through your findings. What might God be saying to you? Is anything particularly relevant to your life at the moment? Write down what you have learnt and refer back to it regularly in the days ahead so that it becomes part of your thinking, reacting and lifestyle.