

Lessons from the Lives of Simeon and Anna

A Study in Luke 2:21-40

Our lesson in this article will center around two older persons who encountered the baby Jesus when Joseph and Mary brought Him to the Temple in Jerusalem to care for purification rites.

Galatians 4:4 clearly says that Jesus was born of a woman, born under the law. And the Old Testament law required that a son be circumcised on the eighth day, and that the mother of a son was to present herself after 40 days for ceremonial purification. The instructions are found in Leviticus 12:2-8 . . .

“Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days . . . ; and in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled . . . And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, (and give it) to the priest, who shall offer it before the LORD, and make an atonement for her; and she shall be cleansed from the issue of her blood . . . And if she (is) not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtledoves, or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be clean” (Leviticus 12:2-8).

The book of Leviticus was a Manual for Worship in Israel. The purpose of the book was to show very early in human history that the way to peace with God is by offering an animal sacrifice. In the “burnt offering,” the entire animal was consumed on the altar. It pictured Christ on the cross. In the “sin offering,” the sins of weakness, error, and ignorance were atoned for. The offering pictured an atonement for those sins which were not done in open defiance of God. In all the offerings, the principle of the death of one substituting for another was established as part of God’s training of mankind.

In verses 21-24 (of Luke 2), we read about three different rituals connected with the birth of Jesus.

- 1) **The circumcision of Jesus** (took place when He was 8 days old/verse 21).
- 2) **The purification of Mary** (took place when Jesus was 40 days old/verses 22a, 24).
- 3) **The dedication of Jesus** (took place at the Temple in Jerusalem, also 40 days after Jesus’ birth/verses 22b, 23).

Since Jesus was born without sin, these rites were not necessary for Him. But Joseph and Mary aimed to live in perfect submission to the plan of God. They observed the Old Testament purification rites for a male child, and for a woman following the birth of a child (Leviticus 12:2-4). They were careful to show that Jesus was brought up in strict accordance with Jewish law. Jesus came from a family that sought to honor the Lord.

Ordinarily, parents were to bring a lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon. But in the case of the poor, they were permitted to bring a pair of doves or two young pigeons. The fact that Mary brought no lamb, and only two young pigeons (verse 24), is a reflection of the poverty into which Jesus was born.

Mary and Joseph had no lamb. Most likely the wise men from the East had not yet come to worship the new-born King, and to bring rich gifts to relieve the poverty of the little family. So Joseph and Mary brought two young pigeons as a sacrifice to God.

At the Temple, the baby Jesus was routinely received by the priests. They apparently did not know (nor did they care to know) who He was. But two elderly saints were at the Temple, and they knew who He was, and they lovingly welcomed Him, the Messiah of Israel!

Our lesson may easily be divided into two parts:

- 1) Simeon gets to see the Messiah and offers his prediction (verses 25-35).
- 2) Anna the prophetess gives thanks for the Christ child (verses 36-38).

1. Simeon Gets to See the Messiah (2:25-35)

There was a devout older man named Simeon, to whom the Holy Spirit had revealed—that before he died, he would see the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah (verse 26).

Not much is known about Simeon. He likely was in Israel what we would call a “lay person.” He was a “just and devout” man (middle of verse 25)—that is, in conduct he was respectful toward other human beings, and he was reverent toward God.

Conditions in Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth were very dismal.

- Israel was occupied by the Roman armies.
- There was the cruel King Herod.
- The scribes and Pharisees had externalized religion.
- The Sadducees were worldly-minded leaders.

It is encouraging to note, however, that even in the midst of all the darkness and despair, God has always had some who were devout followers.

Simeon was just one of the many persons who looked for “the Consolation of Israel” (verse 25). The term “Consolation” was a name applied by the Jews to the Messiah. The word “consolation” is spelled with a capital letter in the newer translations. Simeon eagerly expected the Messiah to come and rescue his people. He knew the promise of Isaiah (in many places)—about how the Messiah would “comfort” (bring consolation to) His people (Isaiah 49:13; 52:9; 66:13).

Simeon sensed a divine impulse to go to the Temple at a precise day and hour—the very time when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple. (The word “parents” in verse 27 is not a denial of the Virgin Birth. It simply acknowledges that in a legal sense Joseph and Mary were the parents of Jesus.)

When Simeon saw the baby Jesus, he took Him up in his arms and “blessed God” (verse 28). Simeon sensed that this very child was the Messiah, and he was indeed very grateful.

It was then that Simeon offered praise to God, in a song which is often known as the “Nunc Dimittis” (a Latin term which means “now you are dismissing”). Simeon’s words were, “Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace” (verse 29). The word translated “depart” literally means “release.” Simeon, now that he saw the Messiah, was asking to be relieved of his earthly duty, and to be released from the heavy burdens of life.

In his song of praise, Simeon said further, “mine eyes have seen thy salvation” (verse 30). Simeon’s physical eyes saw only a helpless Baby, but his prophetic insight saw the salvation which was potentially available for all humankind. The phrase “all people” (verse 31) is a reference to all tribes and races and nations of people.

The average Jew was looking for a political Messiah who would bring independence to Israel (deliverance from bondage to the Romans), but this devout older man saw the Messiah as a Savior—One who would deliver people in all nations from the bondage of sin.

The salvation which Jesus would bring is twofold:

1) *Salvation is a light*—the Gentiles living in darkness and ignorance needed light. Jesus revealed the true knowledge of God to the Gentiles. Without Him, they did not know the way to eternal life. They worshipped the works of their own hands.

2) *Salvation is a glory*—the Jews living in the midst of humiliation and reproach (under bondage to the pagan Roman armies), needed glory. Jesus was a source of glory for the people of Israel. They had the patriarchs and covenants and promises, but under Roman rule it seemed as if they may have been forgotten.

Verse 33 says that Joseph and Mary “marveled at those things which were spoken of him.” Joseph and Mary knew all that Simeon had said about Jesus was true (that is, that He was the Savior for people in all nations), but they marveled that these truths should come from a stranger, and that they should be given under such unusual circumstances.

Jesus would bring light and glory to all people; His presence really manifested the presence (the glory) of God. Even today, the glory and presence and salvation provided by the Lord Jesus is so marvelous that we love to use the words of Philip Bliss in our worship services: “Sing them over again to me, Wonderful words of life.”

After Simeon had uttered his song of praise, he said to Mary, “This Child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel” (verse 34). The attitudes people show toward Jesus, and the response they give to Him, will decide their eternal destiny.

Christ is the Rock in whom **believers** will find refuge: Those who humble themselves and repent of their sins, and receive the Lord Jesus—will rise and be blessed.

By way of contrast, Christ is the Rock on which **rejecters** will be broken. Those who are arrogant and unrepentant and unbelieving—will fall and be punished.

Those who reject the Christ will “fall”—be excluded from the kingdom. Those who accept Him will “rise”—be welcomed into the kingdom. These words of Simeon have been an accurate prophecy, for over the years Christ has been the occasion for a mighty sifting of people. The most important decision any person will ever make centers around what he or she will do with Jesus Christ. “This Child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel” (verse 34a).

Simeon spoke additional words. He said that Jesus was a “Sign which shall be spoken against” (verse 34b). Even a casual reading of the Gospel accounts will illustrate how Jesus was slandered by His own people. There is something unique about the Person of Christ. His very presence on earth proved to be a tremendous rebuke to sin and wickedness—and even today His name brings out the bitter animosity of some human hearts. You can talk about “God” to most people, but the moment you seriously mention receiving Jesus Christ—the countenance of many will freeze, the eyes will stare, and there is sometimes a stony silence.

Simeon said to Mary, “A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also” (verse 35). Sorrow as well as joy would come to Mary through her relation with this unusual Child. This helpless Baby would be the suffering and dying Messiah. Simeon looked across the decades of time, and pictured Jesus hanging on the cross, dying for the sins of the people. The “sword” which Mary would experience was the pain of seeing her Son die. Simeon described the grief that would flood Mary’s heart when she would witness the crucifixion of her Son (John 19:25).

Simeon’s prophecy concluded by declaring that “the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (verse 35b). Because some will accept and others will reject Christ as Savior—the thoughts and motives of many (whether good or bad) will be made known. The way a person responds to the Savior is a test of the person’s inward motives and affections.

2. Anna Gives Thanks for the Christ Child (2:36-38)

On the day that Joseph and Mary entered the Temple with the infant Jesus, there were two faithful saints of God who paid particular attention—and knew for sure that the wait for a Messiah was over. Like Simeon, Anna the prophetess was one of the faithful remnant in Israel who was waiting for the advent of the Messiah. Verse 38a says that she “gave thanks . . . unto the Lord” for the Christ Child.

Verses 36-37 give her father’s name, the tribe of Israel to which she belonged, and share some information about her age. (Being of the tribe of Asher, and living in Jerusalem, shows that the so-called

“Lost Tribes of Israel” were not completely lost. Asher was one of the ten northern tribes, and representatives of that tribe still existed in Israel in New Testament times.)

We are told also that Anna was a widow, and that she was married only seven years when her husband died. Anna was the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, and thus from Galilee. The mention of her lineage indicates that she came from a family of some distinction. She was living in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ birth. She was in the Temple courtyards day and night worshiping God through fasting and prayer. She was longing for the redemption promised through the Messiah.

William Barclay calls Anna “One of the Quiet of the Land.”

She loved the house of God.

She was a woman of great self-denial.

She had known sorrow, but she had not grown bitter.

She was at least 84 years old, but she never ceased to hope. (In fact, she may have been a widow for 84 years—the text is not clear. But if she had been widowed for 84 years, then she would likely have been more than 100 years old).

Anna was faithful in interceding for others. Her great age did not deter her from serving the Lord. In fact, verse 38 indicates that she was an evangelist in the sense that she spoke of the Christ Child to all those who “looked for redemption in Jerusalem.” She told all who would listen that the Messiah had come. Their looking was over! She conveyed this news wherever she could find an interested hearer.

All of us should learn some lessons from this godly older man (Simeon), and the pious older woman (Anna).

1. God has a faithful believing people even in the darkest of times. The gates of hell will never completely prevail against the church. There was a Lot in Sodom, an Obadiah in Ahab’s household, a Daniel in Babylon, a Jeremiah in Zedekiah’s court, and a Simeon in Jerusalem. The true church may be a scattered and divided flock, but it will never die.

2. Simeon is an example of how a believer can be delivered from the fear of death. When he once saw the Messiah, he was ready to be released from the limitations of the physical body, and allowed to go to his eternal home. He was looking forward to the time when he would be absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

3. Anna was very old (“of a great age”/verse 36). There is work to do even for those who are far along in years. Anna spent her time in prayer, praise, and in proclaiming truth about the Messiah. What a blessed way to spend one’s declining years. Older people today are often freed up by retirement to pursue ministry in a way that they could not when they were employed. There are newsletters to edit, children to tutor, sick people to visit, and tremendous needs that call for ongoing prayer and fasting.

4. Just as Simeon and Anna were waiting in hope for the coming of the Messiah, so a similar hope is beating in many hearts today. As the darkness around us deepens and the moral and spiritual decay becomes more pronounced, a remnant of God's people are looking for another prophetic fulfillment—the Advent of Jesus in His Second Coming, when He returns in great power and great glory.

I must speak yet to some among our readers who are older, and may not yet be prepared to meet God.

You know that soon you must face the Lord.

The breath of eternity is already in your face.

You have not experienced Christ's salvation.

If you cannot say with Simeon that you are ready to depart this life in peace, please remember that there is no greater calamity than to face life's sunset years without Christ and His salvation. Why not acknowledge your condition before God, repent of your sins, and invite Jesus into your heart today? Repeat the verse you memorized long ago: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Jesus says, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

Most of us have experienced times of sadness at some time during our life's experience, but Christmas-time reminds us that the coming of Jesus is good news. The angel that announced His birth said, "I bring you good tidings of great joy."

When the angel spoke to Joseph, explaining how Mary came to be expecting a child—the angel said, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins."

To know Him is to have eternal life.

To believe in Him is the greatest of all decisions.

To follow Him is the noblest of all duties.

-Harold S. Martin

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