

LUKE 2:21-38—JESUS: OUR LIGHT AND OUR LIFE

INTRO: A week ago we celebrated Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ. Dec 25 may or may not have been the actual day on which Jesus was born, but if it was, then tomorrow is the 8th day after his birth, the day on which he was circumcised. We are beginning a new year. And if Dec 25 was his birthday, then the beginning of the new year also corresponds to Jesus' own beginning.

Why is that important? It is important because **Luke 2** tells us about the beginning of Jesus' life—not just his birth, with the manger and the shepherds—but the *significance* of his life and, particularly, the significance of his life for *us*. So today I want us to take a look at **Luke 2:21-38**, which reveals that, even at the beginning of his earthly existence, Jesus was the subject of prophecies, and those prophecies pertain to us. Since that is true, we should see what those prophecies are and what are the implications of those prophecies for *our* lives.

READ (Luke 2:21-28)

PROP: Jesus unites, divides, and exposes the true state of our heart.

O/S: We are going to look at three aspects of this account: first, the background to what is going on; second, the hope that was animating Simeon and Anna; and third, the two sets of prophecies that Simeon pronounced about Jesus.

I. Background: v. 21 tells us that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day after he was born. This was in accordance with **Lev 12:3** which calls for circumcision of a newborn boy on the eighth day after his birth.

vv. 22-24 go on to tell us that Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and offer a sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. This coming to the temple probably happened about 40 days after Jesus' birth, not the same day as his circumcision. The reason is that **Lev 12:4** specifies that while a woman was considered ritually unclean for 7 days after giving birth to a baby boy, for an additional 33 days she was not allowed to enter the sanctuary or touch any consecrated thing until “**the days of her purification**” were complete.

Then **Lev 12:6-8** say that when the “**days of her purification**” were complete, she was to bring to the priest a one year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, but if she could not afford a lamb, she could bring two pigeons or turtledoves. When the priest made atonement for her, she would then be considered fully clean. This is telling us that Mary and Joseph were poor. But there is an irony here is that, although they could not afford a lamb, they did bring a Lamb, because Jesus himself is “**the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.**”

This also tells us something about God. Specifically, he cares about the poor. When God came to earth in the person of Jesus, he did not come to Rome or Jerusalem; he did not live in a palace, but was born into a poor family. Jesus was born in a stable, and Mary even laid him in a manger, which, as you may know, is a feeding trough for animals. We often think about God as being “up there” somewhere. Yes, he is transcendent and upholds the entire universe. But he is also here. He is intimately involved with his creation and with us. He knows what we are going through because he went through it himself. Nothing is too small for him. We need to remember and draw on that, particularly when things are not going well for us. Things did not go well for Jesus—and that remained true for him from the moment he was born until he was arrested, severely scourged, and executed as a common criminal.

In v. 27 it also says that Mary and Joseph “**brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law.**” That is probably referring to the payment of 5 shekels, which was the price paid to redeem a firstborn son, according to **Num 18:15-16**. All this is telling us is that Jesus was being raised in accordance with the Law of Moses, just as it says in **Gal 4:4-5**, that Jesus was “**born under the Law, so that he might redeem those who were under the Law.**”

So what was:

II. The hope that was animating Simeon and Anna: v. 25 tells us that Simeon was “**waiting for the consolation of Israel.**” And v. 38 says that Anna began to speak of Jesus “**to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.**” Those phrases, “**the consolation of Israel**” and “**the redemption of Jerusalem**”

are parallel. They concerned Messiah's deliverance of Israel. Israel's consolation and redemption was a key element in many strands of OT prophecy, particularly in Isaiah.

What is interesting is that both Simeon and Anna had used phrases concerning Messiah's deliverance of Israel that had nationalistic connotations, but when they saw Jesus, their focus was on *him*. Thus, in vv. 30-35 Simeon's remarks concentrate on who Jesus is and what he will do. Likewise, in v. 38 Anna "**continued to speak of Him.**" This all tells us that, even before Jesus began his public ministry, the Holy Spirit was revealing that God's plan for the consolation and redemption of Israel was *not* a political or nationalistic program at all. Instead, the real work of the Messiah was of a fundamentally different and far deeper, broader, and more personal nature, encompassing "*all peoples*" including the Gentiles (according to vv. 31-32). It was designed to bring about the forgiveness of sin and the inauguration of God's true kingdom.

v. 36 also tells us that Anna was a member of the tribe of Asher. Asher was one of the northern tribes that had been part of the northern kingdom of Israel, as opposed to the southern kingdom of Judah. The book of Judges tells us that "**the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out.**" By the time Jesus came to earth, the Northern Kingdom was no more, and the people living there were known as Samaritans. The presence of Anna here is at least hinting that the ultimate mission of Jesus was to all people, including the Canaanites, Samaritans, and Gentiles in general.

This leads us to:

III. The two sets of prophecies Simeon pronounced about Jesus: vv. 25-26 tells us that Simeon "**had the Holy Spirit upon him [and] would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.**" So what he says is important, inspired by the Holy Spirit himself. Simeon begins by saying [READ v. 29], but the key is vv. 30-32 [READ]. vv. 30-31 tell us that God's salvation is not limited to Israel, but applies to "**all peoples.**"

That is confirmed by v. 32, which is a quotation from Isa 42:6 and 49:6. Those verses are from two of the so-called "Servant Songs" in Isaiah. In Isaiah, the Servant of the Lord has the Spirit of God upon him; will bring salvation to Israel and the Gentiles, and is a "*light of the Gentiles,*" as Simeon quoted; the Servant also is beaten and afflicted; he is despised and forsaken; despite persecution he does not open his mouth; and he dies as an offering, bearing the sins of many. This all relates to Jesus Christ.

By quoting from these Servant Songs, Simeon was bringing in the rest of their contest in addition to just what he was quoting. Simeon's quoting from the prophecy of Isaiah is pointing out that, even at the beginning of his earthly life, Jesus was recognized as the fulfillment of prophecies over 700 years old, and he is the true Servant of the Lord. The promised Servant of the Lord was coming not only to the nation of Israel, but would bring salvation and the revelation of God to all people of the world.

I think this is important to consider, particularly as we begin a new year. Isaiah was saying that Jesus is the light of God's revelation to us. Therefore, if you want to know who God is, look to Jesus. If you want to know what God is like, look to Jesus. If you want to know what God likes and does not like, look to Jesus. If you want to know God's will, look to Jesus. If you want to know how we should live, look to Jesus.

We have just finished the "read through the Bible in a year" program. Let me suggest that this year we concentrate each day in reading something from the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In **John 14** Jesus said, "**If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him.**" He also said in **Matthew 7** [READ Matt 7:24-27]. In light of this, Rebecca Pippert suggests this, "**Begin to read the Gospels, every day. Each day as you read, something will probably hit you and make sense. Whatever that is, do it as soon as you can.**" If we do this, he has promised that he will be with us, as we just saw. And we will draw closer to him. We will start seeing his will for our lives. And as we start consciously acting in obedience to him, we will become more and more like him. IOW, Jesus unites people: he unites Gentiles and Jews together into one new family; he unites us with himself; and he even works in us to unite our character with his own. And that is the point of our whole life.

But Simeon went on. In vv. 34-35 he gave another set of prophecies, this time not quoting from Scripture, but again directly speaking about Jesus: what he would do and the effect he would have [READ vv. 34-35].

He first says that Jesus "**is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel.**" Commentators have looked at this in two main ways: some see this as referring to two groups of people—those who reject Jesus as

Lord will fall to their eternal death, but those who receive him as Lord will rise to eternal life; others see this as referring to the same group of people—those who receive Jesus as Lord—they will first fall, IOW they must lose their pride in their own spiritual achievements and/or will face persecution, but will then rise to eternal life.

I think the first option is probably preferable, particularly since it is paralleled by the next thing Simeon says, that Jesus is “a sign that is opposed.” Most of the religious leaders in Israel opposed Jesus. They also demanded from him a “sign,” and Jesus told them the only sign they would be given was the sign of the prophet Jonah. Jesus compared Jonah’s being three days in the belly of the fish to his own coming burial for three days before his resurrection. But there is more to the sign of Jonah than that. In **John 7**, the Pharisees attacked Nicodemus—one of their own—telling him, “**Search and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee**” (where Jesus was from). But they were wrong. One prophet was from Galilee—that prophet was Jonah, who was from a little village only about 3 miles away from Nazareth.

Simeon then makes a parenthetical comment to Mary, namely “a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” What he is saying is that Jesus will bring grief as well as joy, death as well as life. His own mother will not be spared the grief of seeing her son opposed, persecuted, and ultimately executed like a common criminal. One of the things these prophecies are telling us is that if God did not spare his own Son, and Jesus did not spare his own mother, why do we think we will be spared suffering, grief, and even persecution? Jesus said we can expect all those things. They are some of the means he uses to make us more like himself. I wish that were not the case. But Jesus was “**a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.**” Since we are not greater than him, we can expect the same in our own lives.

IOW, Jesus divides people: he brings opposition; he divides believers from unbelievers based on our relationship with him. That can pierce our souls when we think of loved ones who no longer love us because of Jesus. Yet that confronts each of us with the question—Who or what is most important to you: Jesus, or someone or something else?

But Jesus also said that he will never leave us or forsake us. IOW, we do not have to go through suffering, grief, and persecution alone. He is with us. But he has done more. Although he personally ascended back to the Father in heaven, where he constantly makes intercession for us, he knows we are physical people in a physical world. So he has left his physical body—the church, the body of Christ, our brothers and sisters in faith. We are a family, and families take care of their own.

One of the things Maxx talked about awhile ago is getting to know, on a deeper level, some of our brothers and sisters in the body. We need to do this so that we can draw upon such relationships when we need help in getting through hard times. That is one reason Christ gave us the church. It is one of his means of providing for us. Let us deepen our relationships in the church this coming year.

Although the prophecies about the fall and rise of many and the sign that is opposed pertain, either explicitly or implicitly, to people “in Israel,” they have universal application. We already saw that Simeon’s first set of prophecies showed that Jesus is the true Servant of the Lord in fulfillment of Isaiah and brings salvation to all peoples, not just Israel. His second set of prophecies is expanding on that.

We see this again in Simeon’s last statement, that Jesus is a sign “so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” Basically, what we do about Jesus reveals the true state of our heart. Jesus is the key. People may claim to be “spiritual,” but Jesus said, “**Since you don’t know who I am, you don’t know who my Father is. If you knew me, you would also know my Father.**” That will preeminently become clear at the judgment, where Jesus said, “**What is done in secret will be shouted from the rooftops.**” Again, Jesus is the key. Our relationship with him reveals the true state of our heart.

What we are seeing is that, from the very beginning of Jesus’ life, God was using Simeon and Anna to make clear the comprehensive and fundamental significance of Jesus. Let me summarize this:

- First, Jesus had been prophesied over 700 years before he came into the world. His coming was for people are from “every tribe, tongue, nation, and people” in the world, not just Israel. While Simeon’s second set of prophecies referred specifically to Israel, they also have universal application. Indeed, in many respects, the church is the new, true, spiritual Israel, as Paul indicates in **Romans 11** and much of the NT makes clear. So let us get to know the Jesus revealed in the Gospels. Connect with the church, which is his body and family on the earth. Jesus is the most important person in the universe. Get to know him deeply and well.

- Second, Jesus unites people—all those who receive him as Lord are adopted into his family. Therefore, even though we are from different earthly families, different groups, tribes, races, and backgrounds, in a greater and far more important sense, we are now one: brothers and sisters in a family that will be together forever. Consequently, let us get to know each other deeper. We should be able to trust and count on each other more than we trust and count on even our earthly family members. Let that become a reality for us this year.
- Third, Jesus also brings division. Simeon prophesied that Jesus would bring about the fall of some and the rise of others. He would be a sign that is opposed. Interestingly, the Qur'an even calls Jesus "a sign for all the people of the world"; yet he is derided by much of Islam and his followers are persecuted. IOW, Simeon's prophecy is being fulfilled today. Jesus himself said, "**I do not come to bring peace, but a sword**" and said that he would set father against son, mother against daughter, and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. All of those prophecies are also being fulfilled today, and many of us have first-hand experience of that in our own earthly families. Thus, the sword that would pierce Mary's soul is being played out in slightly different ways between Christians and those we love and care about who do not have Jesus.
- Finally, Jesus reveals the true state of our hearts. Abraham Lincoln said, "**You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time; but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.**" With Jesus it is different. We cannot fool him any of the time. He knows the very thoughts, secrets, and intents of our hearts. That is another reason why we need to know him deeply. The closer we get to him, the more his thoughts will become our thoughts; his priorities our priorities; and his values our values.

Think how it could be this year if all of us, began thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting more and more like Jesus. When we act like a loving family toward each other and start naturally showing the love of Jesus to others, despite the deep political and other issues which now divide so many people, people will see it and want to be like that, too. The irony is this: Jesus brings division as a result of people's acceptance or rejection of him. Yet if we all start thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting like him, the walls of division will be breached. A greater unity even with nonbelievers will result because of *our* Christlikeness.

CONCL: This passage from the beginning of Christ's life is a profound account that points us to who he is, what he does, and the significance that has for us. Let us be committed to a deeper unity with Christ and with each other, so that when the world sees that, they will want that too.