

*The Prophecies of Simeon and Anna (Lk 2.21-38)*

*WestminsterReformedChurch.org*

*Pastor Ostella*

*2-14-2010*

<sup>21</sup> And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. <sup>22</sup> And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." <sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. <sup>26</sup> And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. <sup>27</sup> And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, <sup>28</sup> he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, <sup>29</sup> "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation <sup>31</sup> that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." <sup>33</sup> And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed <sup>35</sup> (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." <sup>36</sup> 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, <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

## Introduction

Luke 2.21-38 records the first visit of Jesus to the temple; His parents brought Him there soon after His circumcision; He was only a few months old. In this account, we have some events that converge in the temple at Jerusalem at a precise hour. They include the presentation of Jesus and two prophetic proclamations: the departure song of Simeon, and the confession of Anna. Surely, the message of this text is in the prophecies and the prophecies surface in response to some matters of background. So, we have three points to cover: the background of the prophecies of Simeon and Anna, the prophecy of Simeon, and the prophecy of Anna.

### 1A. The background of the prophecies of Simeon and Anna, 2.21-24

Acts of obedience to requirements of the Law set the stage for these prophecies. Although there is some overlap, we can identify four requirements before us in the narrative. They are circumcision, purification, presentation, and sacrifice. We have to understand these requirements and how the parents of Jesus sought to fulfill them to understand the prophecies of Simeon and Anna.

#### 1) The rite of circumcision

In a brief and seemingly isolated way, Luke summarizes the circumcision of Jesus in 2.21: **And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.** We might think that this verse is a mere transitional comment that closes the previous section. Two things suggest a bond of Jesus' circumcision with the events that form the background to the prophecies. A) First, circumcision is a thread in the fabric of the purification law that comes up next in the narrative. In Leviticus it states that a woman who gives birth to a male child needs purification for forty-days divided into seven days and thirty-three days (12.2, 4). This division of days highlights the circumcision of the child on the eighth day: **And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. 4Then she [the mother] shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed (12.3-4).** B) Another thing that bonds the circumcision of 2.21 with this entire section (22-38) is the way the thirty-three days are omitted. Opening with the conjunction

“and,” verse 22 connects the circumcision with the end of the purification that takes place at the sanctuary after the forty days of uncleanness. Therefore, circumcision is part of the setting for the prophecies of this section in Luke.

#### 2) The Law of purification

Luke, as we noted earlier, introduces the purification of Mary as if it followed the circumcision of Jesus almost immediately: **And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem** (2.22; why Joseph is included in “their” purification is not clear in the text, but Joseph joined with Mary in some way in “their” process of purification). Mary needs purification because she gave birth to a son, her firstborn son. She is unclean but she has a provision in the Law to remedy that impurity. Of course, she was not actually unclean; she was ceremonially unclean. There is nothing sinful about child birth, or giving birth to a male child, or giving birth for the first time to a son, a firstborn son. The uncleanness was symbolical and representative. To be sure, the effects were very pungent for she was separated from fellowship with God at the tabernacle and temple. The background point here is that His parents brought Jesus to Jerusalem and to the temple because of the law regarding the male children that included not only circumcision on the eighth day, but the need for purification of the mother who gave birth to a son.

#### 3) The presentation of the firstborn

Another background fact that led to the prophecies of Simeon and Anna is the demand of the Law that parents dedicate all firstborn sons to the Lord: **And on that very day the LORD brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt ...1The LORD said to Moses, 2 “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.” 3Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place (Ex 12.51-13.3).** In 2.23-24, Luke refers to this passage when he tells us that one of the reasons for the trip to Jerusalem is to present their firstborn son to the Lord: **they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord<sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”;** cf. the firstborn of my sons, 13.

vvvvvvvvvvvvvvvv

15). It is surely important to note that the context of Exodus 12-13 has to do with the institution of the Passover feast because the death angel passed over the children of Israel when he killed all the firstborn of Egypt. The Passover lamb was slain and its blood placed on the doorposts of the Israelites and the Lord said, “When I see the blood I will pass over you” (Ex 12.13). With the death of the firstborn of Egypt, the Lord claimed the firstborn of Israel to be His: consecrate to me all the firstborn...every firstborn is mine (13.2). Exodus Accordingly, the parents of Jesus come to Jerusalem intent on fulfilling this duty that reflects the special ownership of the firstborn in Israel by the Lord. (cf. the taking of the firstborn in judgment on Egypt and the passing over of the firstborn of Israel by the death angel).

#### 4) The sacrifice of purification

The parents of Jesus have another goal, which is to complete the purification of Mary by fulfilling the Law of sacrifice. Her ceremonial uncleanness was powerfully real. However, there was a remedy in symbol as well in the gospel of the sacrificial system. Near the end of her time of purification, she was allowed to enter the sanctuary, but she must come with some animals for sacrifice. If she could not afford to bring a lamb, **then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons** (Lev 12.8). By offering sacrifice for atonement, the remedy was completed and restoration was sealed: **the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean** (12.8). Luke cites the stipulation of the Law about turtledoves or pigeons indicating that Joseph and Mary followed the Law, even though they did not bring a lamb, their offering was still **according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of**

turtledoves, or two young pigeons" (Lk 2.24). Thus, circumcision, purification, presentation, and sacrifice are background for the prophecies of Simeon and Anna.

## 2A. The prophecy of Simeon, 2.25-35

Simeon is just a man in Jerusalem, but he is a man of faith in the promises of the OT. He is a prophet to whom the Lord gave a special revelation, namely, that he would not die without seeing the Messiah: <sup>25</sup> **Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.** <sup>26</sup> **And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ** (2.25-26). Thus, we have this amazing convergence of events that occur in the temple. As the parents of Jesus seek to obey OT Law, they bring their firstborn son into the temple where they cross paths with Simeon and Anna, a prophet and prophetess who prophesy in response to the presence of Jesus.

What does Simeon do at this special time in history when his eyes fix upon the Lord's Christ? He embraces Jesus taking Him up in His arms and He blesses God: <sup>27</sup> **And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law,** <sup>28</sup> **he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,** <sup>29</sup> **"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;** <sup>30</sup> **for my eyes have seen your salvation** <sup>31</sup> **that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,** <sup>32</sup> **a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel"** (2.27-32). How often has this kind of thing happened: a child is born, and named, and someone takes the child up in his or her arms with joy and wonder? It reoccurs often, but this time we have an event, an event that is like no other. This man holding up this baby in his arms is a unique event in the history of redemption. This is a fulfillment of promise in miniature of what is gigantic. The Lord brought it to pass in this manner to cause us to stop, pause, and consider. God condescends to put the great promises of a coming one, the son of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David into the promise to Simeon, to one who waited, that he would see **the Lord's Christ** in his life time before his death.

Therefore, this embrace of a little one, this holding of a baby up in the arms is a unique happening that is like none that ever happened in the past or will ever happen again in the future. The great promises of the OT and the small promise to Simeon converge at Jerusalem in the temple on this day.

What does Simeon say at this special time in history when he sees the Lord's Christ?

He blesses God and speaks to Mary. Both directions of his speech are prophetic and both give us insight into what God is now doing in the history of salvation.

### 1) He blesses God

His blessing begins in verses 28-30: <sup>28</sup> **he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,** <sup>29</sup> **"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;** <sup>30</sup> **for my eyes have seen your salvation.** First, he is very personal noting that the Lord is letting him die in peace. The title of his prophecy, Nunc Dimittis, comes from the Latin for "now...let depart." It is his song of peaceful departure. In a fundamental sense, his life is over because he has finished his work as a prophet and watchman. The completion is in what he now sees. He sees the fulfillment of the covenant; He sees the Lord's Christ and that means he sees God's provision of salvation ("your salvation," v. 30). He then shifts from the personal side of things, from his privilege of seeing the coming of salvation in the coming of Christ, to the nature of the salvation that he sees. It has a universal quality to it: it extends to Israel and the nations: **my eyes have seen your salvation** <sup>31</sup> **that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,** <sup>32</sup> **a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel"** (2.30-32). On one hand, God's provision of salvation is something He has prepared for all peoples. The light of truth that guides the steps of God's people belongs not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. On the other hand, this salvation through this child that Simeon holds up in his arms is

for glory to the people of Israel. Change for them is in the wind, but even with their sinfulness, they are not excluded from the blessings that will come from this child. While the parents of Jesus marveled at what was said about their son, Simeon turned from blessing God to blessing them: <sup>33</sup>**And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.** <sup>34</sup>**And Simeon blessed them** (2.33-34). Blessing God, he blesses them: praising God, he seeks their good to the praise of God. Then, the prophet tells more of what is coming is in the word to Mary.

2) He speaks to Mary

Finally, he turns to Mary with an attention arousing “behold” and tells her three sobering things: **"Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed** <sup>35</sup> **(and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed"** (2.34-35).

One: this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many; for a sign that is opposed.

Two: a sword will pierce your own soul also.

Three: there is a purpose, to reveal the thoughts from many hearts.

The concern here is the purpose at the end of verse 35 that explains the opposition and the pain of soul that Mary will experience. Through opposition, God will fulfill His design to reveal thoughts from many hearts. This has a bite to it because the revealing of thoughts is negative. This text here (35b) does not speak of a saving revelation. Instead, for many, Jesus will reveal the true sinfulness of their hearts that are full of stubborn rebellion against Him.

### 3A. The prophecy of Anna, 2.36-38

Luke describes Anna and summarizes her life up to this day and hour at the temple: <sup>36</sup> **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,** <sup>37</sup> **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.** <sup>38</sup>**And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem** (2.36-38).

She was an elderly woman who had a husband for seven years, but then lived as a widow until she was eighty-four (or perhaps she was a widow for eighty-four years). She did not depart from the temple (worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day). She did not live twenty-four hours a day in the temple, with no food, with the single-minded objective of worship and prayer without ceasing. The point is that she did these things intermittently (day and night, that is, day or night) with stubborn faithfulness.

She too crossed paths with Jesus in the temple: **at that very hour**. Then Luke summarizes what she did without quoting her or giving specific content: **she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem** (2.38). She gives thanks to God and a word of witness to men. To those waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem, she spread the word that the redemption of Jerusalem has come.

### Conclusion

The wonder of the parents of Jesus is a good place to begin our applications.

1) You have to wonder in awe at God's providence

We sense the providence of God at work in all the happenings associated with the coming of John and Jesus. Here, God's hand is even more evident behind the scenes of the actions that converge at a particular hour at Jerusalem and in the temple. More rays of the new day's sunrise are beginning to shine in these actions involving Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Simeon, and Anna. There are redemptive events and divine interpretation of them. We have redemptive deed and redemptive word; act and interpretation. All is orchestrated by the Lord who is in full control

working all things after the counsel of His will (Eph 1.11). Marvel at how God works out His purposes in history day and night, and day by day.

The matter of time and providential timing connects obedience to the Law regarding circumcision, purification, presentation, and sacrifice to the prophecies of two seasoned saints of the old economy. How can you not wonder in awe at God's providence?

2) You have to marvel at the good news that the prophet held up in his arms

If you get a taste of what is happening, even just a sample, of the message here about Jesus, then you will stand amazed with Simeon in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene. Simeon embraced the child and held him up in his arms. You will embrace the true man, Son of man and Son of God. You will rest in the joy of who Jesus is: the ultimate realization of the covenant to Abraham, the covenant descendent who is the Savior, the promised seed of Eve that would bring restoration from all the effects of the fall, the true and greater Isaac through whom all families of the earth will be blessed.

This child is good news and His coming brings good news of great joy. Therefore, Simeon's message about Jesus is that He is the coming one through whom Jewish particularism will give way to national universalism. His is a light of revelation to the Gentiles. A new family of the redeemed is coming such that those that sat in darkness have seen a great light. Moreover, there will be light for the *Gentiles* and glory for *Israel*. Anna's witness combined with the witness of Simeon teaches that the redemption of Jerusalem involves the formation of a new human family composed of Israel and the nations. All the former barriers are coming down to form one body. This is a new human race. All nations have the blessing of redemption as God promised to Abraham and through his descendants. What a wonder: this child in the arms is the good news in the flesh.

3) You have to wonder at the somber side of the good news

The way of accomplishment is by the sword of division and conflict. Many will rise to worship the Lord's Christ, but many will fall on Him like falling on a rock. The hateful hearts of many will be laid bare in the scorching light of the truth. You cannot sit on the fence regarding Christ; you have to make a choice. He brings it about; what is hidden in the heart will be revealed in the daylight. You ought to fear God and His doings; so, worship God in reverential fear and awe.

To marvel at what God has done in Christ the Son of man and Son of God is doorstep to worship. Earnest worship is the way to live with stubborn faithfulness before God; it is the way to live with hope and to die in peace.

**May we fall down before the majesty of God our Father and His Son our Lord Jesus Christ; may the Holy Spirit teach us to marvel at the way God accomplishes His redemptive plan through history in the posterity of Abraham; may we wonder at what is said about this child who is the Savior of Israel and the nations, amen.**