

Simeon and Anna Proclaiming the Gospel of the Firstborn (Lk 2.21-38)

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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. ²² 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 ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." ³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ 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 ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." ³⁶ 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, ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ 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

Today we are going to take another look at Luke 2.21-38. The goal is to discuss the application of this text and others like it. How do we do justice to the author's intent for his original readers while we seek to find legitimate application of his work to readers today? There are issues here that pertain to the history of redemption. This is a good place to spend some time on the significant shift from the OT to the NT and to do biblical-theology, which is simply the study of the Bible with strong awareness and consideration of the setting of a text within the unfolding history redemption and redemptive revelation. A major shift took place when promise became fulfillment in the coming of Christ. This is a continental shift of gigantic proportions.

We need to review the background to the prophecies of Luke 2.21-38 and take another look at them in conjunction with some proposals of application. The aim is to emphasize application. Seeking understanding must include seeking application; it is not complete without it. The quest for application continues the quest for understanding; that is, we learn for living.

We continue here by covering three things related to application: a sketch of principles, a review of applications, and some expansion on both.

1A. A sketch of some interpretation principles leading to application

We need this sketch to better equip ourselves for good workmanship in Gospel study.

1) Read references to the OT (and the OT itself) as Christians, people under the authority of Christ and thus under His word of OT and NT, but read Christianly, in a Christ-oriented way. Recall that this is a central way that we preach the OT when preaching the NT. Even if are not going through an OT book, we preach the OT through the lens of the NT based on a Christian reading of the gospel.

2) Read as people upon whom the ends of the ages have come: as people in the time between. This means that we need to distinguish between apostolic and post-apostolic church history, which are both "in between," but the apostolic part of church history is foundational for

our post-apostolic time. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph 2.20).

3) Read with a sense of salvation history or history of redemption. Read with a sense of the shift from OT to NT, with the challenge in hand of *trying to discern great changes with continuity*, giving a first foot forward to continuity as our Lord teaches us in Mat 5.17: **Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.** Note how the Lord tells us about His relation to the Law and how we are not to think of it. In effect, He says, do not think discontinuity and change though these things are true; there is great change and much discontinuity from OT to NT because of my relation to the Law. Still, you are to think continuity and fulfillment.

4) Read looking back to where quotes and allusions point. When the NT speaks to a thread of truth from an OT account that should make us go back to look at the whole cloth in the OT; that is the best way to insure that we understand the thread in the NT (threads of a fabric send us back to the fabric). So here in Luke 2, we must go back to the laws of circumcision, purification, presentation and sacrifice to get at least a good glimpse of what is back there pointing forward and coming forward. These laws give us the gospel of the OT in symbol.

5) Find interpretation clues in the NT text. In our text, these OT gospel signs are being acted out in the obedience of godly Israelite parents (unique to be sure: Joseph and Mary with a unique child). We need to maintain a sense of this uniqueness as we seek understanding for application. Moreover, the events that converge in a remarkable way in the temple at a precise hour stand without interpretation unless we look to the prophetic words that these events elicit. They clue us in on the meaning and the message.

In this case, we must find the gospel of the new day that is dawning in the gospel of the shadows of the old day that are now being dispelled by the sunrise of the new day. Again, the shadows are circumcision, purification, presentation, and sacrifice. The sunrise is the coming of Christ. Understanding of what is happening comes from the proclamations of Simeon and Anna.

In sum: read as Christians, in between, with a sense of redemptive history, going back to the fabric, and finding clues to go forward for understanding and application.

2A. Review of some applications in light of these principles

Of course, a fundamental goal is to arrive at applications that do justice to the text we are working on and that flow from it. Each paragraph unit within its context is distinct and has something for our nourishment that is distinct. Like a diamond turned in the light, each text gives us another look at the truth. We want to do our best to capture the different reflections. This ought to be a goal we strive for in expository preaching, just as it ought to be a goal toward which we strive seeking to live by the word that is preached.

So let us review and evaluate the applications already on the table from last week. We began in a provisional way with the wonder of the parents of Jesus. This seems like a good place to begin.

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

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

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

The way of accomplishment is by division and conflict, a rising and falling, hateful hearts, and a piercing sword. So we make application: worship God in reverential fear and awe. What can we say about these three applications?

On point one, do you sense God's working behind the scenes of history in these events? His providential control is a wonder and a cause for praise, fair enough, but is this the point Luke is making? This shows that there are good applications to draw from a text that may not be precisely the point the text is making. Regarding point two, it does seem closer to the things unfolding in this text to call for worship with both fear and awe. It seems proper to learn from the responses the Holy Spirit has the writer record, as in the case here of the wondering of Joseph and Mary. On point three, the idea of a sobering side to the good news of Jesus is clearly present in this account and applicable to our setting today.

Thus, it appears that these applications are on the right track. The question that remains is: "do they go far enough down the track?" Do they get far enough and thus close enough to the point of the author? This is a good question to ask in all of our work with the Scriptures. I think we can get a bit closer.

3A. Expansion of these principles and applications

In light of what we have been saying so far, what can we say about the point of this text? The point is the gospel of Jesus that is embodied in the gospel of OT symbols, specifically, in circumcision, purification, presentation, and sacrifice. Central here is how this gospel is now explained by the Lord through the prophetic words of Simeon and Anna.

We can make this point stick by considering a fragmented attempt or a myopic attempt at applying the laws cited in the text with a holistic attempt at applying these laws.

1B. A myopic attempt at Law application (to us in the time between)

In a commentary on Luke, Philip Ryken applies our text to parents and faithful parenting. He is a good author who writes in a good series dedicated to "reformed expository commentary." From the cover jacket of the book, we learn that this series is for pastors and lay readers and "each volume in the series provides exposition that gives careful attention to the biblical text, is doctrinally Reformed, focuses on Christ through the lens of redemptive history, and applies the Bible to our contemporary setting." On Lk 2, Ryken begins with some forceful words about parenting.

However, is the text about parenting and how to be good parents? That seems intuitive: look at these parents; they obey the Law and that means that that have their firstborn son circumcised and they present Him to the Lord. Ryken says, "Good parents pray for their children, asking God to bless them with good health and spiritual growth. They read and sing them the Scriptures. They take them to worship in God's house. And by faith they present their children to God, giving them the sacrament of the covenant, which is the sign of God's promise and the seal of his grace...Mary and Joseph...were godly parents" (88-89). After a helpful survey of OT background, Ryken makes this comment that includes something more: "we learn to set our own children apart for God, which we do through the covenant sign of baptism (see Col. 2:11-12). But even more we see the complete obedience and total dedication of Jesus to the will of God...all through the rest of his life...he fulfilled all the righteousness that we owe to God" (91).

Let us think some about this because this is not as easy as it may first appear. So we learn that all good parents will obey the Law regarding their children, even though we do not circumcise them as a covenant sign in new temple worship. Thus, we have to wonder why we do

not practice religious circumcision. We have no explanation on this point or on how we come to merge circumcision with presentation. Why not have baby dedication separate from infant baptism (since circumcision is something different from circumcision and it took place at least a month later)? I think we will agree that these things must be explained in terms of the history of redemption, “through the lens of redemptive history” to get to application “to our contemporary setting.” However, in this example, he not tell us *how* to do this. How do we think through the transition from OT to NT, from Jewish church to the Christian church, and from the Jewish family to the Christian family?

Furthermore, there is an important question to ask: “is this what Luke is aiming at in this chapter, is it about parenting, about being obedient to the Law of God in our parenting roles? If it is, then of course we must account for the fact that these Laws are no longer binding as such: we are not required, as Christians and Christian parents to circumcise our sons on the eighth day, consider mothers unclean for forty-days, and take our children to the temple as we go to offer sacrifices.

Granted, we must not forget that Matthew 5.17 teaches us to think continuity with all the change and thus to look for the fulfillment forms of OT Laws. We do that to find new wineskin forms of the old wineskins. Here I ask, do we not step in the wrong direction when we try to find one to one correspondences OT to NT and make one to one applications? The mistep looks like this: circumcision becomes baptism, the mother’s purification becomes her sanctification, the baby’s presentation becomes baby dedication, and sacrifice becomes sacrifices of our worship based on the sacrifice of Christ. To be sure, this is not all bad, but, intuitively, do you not agree that this approach seems superficial? It just does not go far enough down the redemptive-historical track.

2B. A holistic attempt at Law application (to us in the time between)

It seems fair to say that the text is not about parents, these parents, parenting, or being good parents. It is about the gospel that is embodied in OT shadows that are being displaced by the sunrise of fulfillment. Therefore, it is about what redemption accomplishes and how redemption is accomplished.

1) We learn what redemption accomplishes

To understand redemption, we must begin with the fact of our impurity as a fallen race. The mother who gives birth for the first time or who gives birth to a son, or who gives birth to for the first time to a son is in all these circumstances unclean or impure. This is a ceremonial and symbolic impurity that has very real consequences: sinners are unclean and denied access to the sanctuary; fellowship with God in His family is broken off. There is good news however, there is a provision for purification: by atonement the unclean **shall be clean** (Lev 12.8).

By means of cleansing from sin, there is restoration to fellowship with God and His family. Simeon and Anna make this plain. Jesus is a light of revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for Israel. Accordingly, 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. Her own ancestry adds to this line of thought. Anna descends from one of the ten lost tribes of northern Israel. The reference is therefore a hint concerning the scope of the redemption of Jerusalem that includes people from all the tribes of Israel, not just those of Judah where Jerusalem is located. This confirms the figurative nature of reference here to the city of Jerusalem. In kernel form, it represents the city of God, the new Jerusalem, the new Israel that is made up of a remnant from all the sons of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons, the children of Israel.

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. So, if you get a taste of what is happening, then you will embrace the true man, Son of man and Son of God. You will rest in the joy of who Jesus is; you will worship Him with wonder and awe.

2) We learn how redemption is accomplished

Consider again the death of the firstborn in Egypt as the redemption price of Israel's freedom from bondage. In the covenant to Abraham, the Lord promised to Abraham a child through whom all nations of the earth would be blessed and circumcision of every male on the eighth day was the covenant embodied in fulfillment and reiterated generation after generation. The circumcision of Jesus is covenant fulfillment par excellence. Jesus is the promised one who would be circumcised and bless all families of the earth. At the time of the Passover, the Lord God claimed ownership of all the firstborn. Each firstborn, the Lord said, is mine: "He is my firstborn son." Why is the mother of the firstborn ceremonially unclean, is it because each firstborn is a sinner (as Ryken 90)? When the mothers in Israel give birth to firstborn sons, they give birth to the holy one. In symbol, they give birth to the one who is the remedy for sin. The mothers are ceremonially unclean by God's stipulation as a symbol of human sinfulness to which God gives His answer in the birth of His firstborn Son.

All the firstborn point to *the* firstborn; this is loaded, it refers to the preeminent son, my son, Isaac-sacrificed son. This is the firstborn Son of God who is not spared by the death angel. He is the sacrifice of all sacrifices. He is the circumcised Son of God cut off from the land of the living. By His circumcision on the cross (Col 2.11) anticipated on the eighth day, sinners are made alive, you, he says, **you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross (Col 2.13-14).** He is the Passover lamb. He is the firstborn who dies to deliver the unclean from their impurities, make atonement, make clean, and give access to the sanctuary and to God for fellowship with God and His new family of the redeemed from bondage.

This is the gospel of the new covenant beginning to shine in the coming of Christ. The story we have to tell to Israel and the nations is the gospel of the firstborn.

May we fall down before the majesty of God our Father and His Son our Lord Jesus Christ; may the Holy Spirit pierce our souls with the stark reality that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day in anticipation of his being cut off by circumcision on the cross. May the Holy Spirit help us absorb the good news that Jesus is the Father's firstborn Son who was not spared by the death angel in order to cleanse us from the defilements of our sin, to bring us to God, and to joyous fellowship forever in the city of God. To the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be all glory, now and forevermore, amen.