

December 20, 2020 | The Christmas Timeline

Luke 2:22-38 | Faithful Watchers

Throughout this series, we've looked at three perspectives surrounding the Christmas story so far: history, Jesus' parents, and the shepherds. Each point of view has helped illustrate a fundamental principle we should dwell on during this Christmas season.

Today, we'll explore the reactions of both an elderly man, Simeon, and an elderly woman, Anna. And, rest assured, they are more than just a few senior citizens. They are extraordinarily pious and well-respected members of the Jewish community. In fact, one was explicitly called a prophetess and, though the other is not expressly given the title of a prophet, he was nevertheless filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke of prophetic things. How remarkable that two individuals who were so devout and so spiritually gifted would be moved at the sight of a mere boy. They had not met him or his parents before, but they still spoke as if they already knew the child. How can this be? What did they say? What is the meaning of their words? Let's find out.

READ: Luke 2:22-38 (ESV)

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.

Before we get into the testimonies, Luke provides us with some helpful details to lay the groundwork for what’s to come. Verses 22-24 refer to two separate Jewish ceremonies. First, Luke tells us about the purification ceremony. This ceremony was where a Jewish woman would wait forty days after her child's birth before going to the Temple to offer sacrifice (cf. Lev. 12:2-4). And, secondly, the presentation ceremony where devoted Jewish couples would present their firstborn to the Lord as a way to show thanksgiving for the child (cf. Ex. 13:2).

Interestingly, Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary presented Jesus with birds to sacrifice rather than a lamb *and* a bird, as was customary. This was because they were poor. Leviticus 12:2-8 stipulates that if a couple was not wealthy enough to present a lamb for the burnt offering, then two birds would suffice. One bird—which would act as a stand-in for the lamb—would be for the burnt offering that atoned for the individual's sins, in this case Mary. The other bird would be for the sin offering, which purified an individual and allowed them to enter the presence of the Lord. In fact, most of the couples in Israel chose to present this kind of "poorer" offering as most of the populace was poor. To offer a lamb was usually only done by those who were *very* wealthy.¹

Luke’s point for this contextual setup is two-fold.

First, it further highlights how committed Joseph and Mary were to the Jewish faith. Caesar Augustus' decree brought them to Bethlehem, but God's law brought them to Jerusalem.² Any Jew reading this account would’ve instantly respected and even liked Joseph and Mary.

Secondly, Simeon and Anna's words later on in this passage have a heightened and paradoxical spin to them, given that this scene is the backdrop. Here’s what I mean.

¹ Bock, Darrell L., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 1994), p. 235.

² Garland, David E., *Luke*, The Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Clinton E. Arnold, Editor, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2011), p. 131.

Mary and Joseph are a couple of parents who are faithful but ordinary. They enter the Temple, as so many had done before, to present a meager but acceptable offering before the Lord. And then, out of nowhere, these parents are approached by two faithful and well-respected Jewish people who begin to praise their Son. The ordinary (i.e., ceremonies) is preceded by the extraordinary (i.e., prophecies).³ Even a typical Sunday morning was anything but ordinary when Jesus Christ was your child.

Now, let's look at these testimonies.

i. Simeon's Testimony: A Revelation to Gentiles

Notice, this man was not a priest. He was not in service of the Temple. He was just a layman—a common man who loved God with everything he had. Simeon represents the best of Israel.⁴ The kind of Israelite that was faithfully awaiting God's deliverance. And while Israel's elite will find themselves at odds with the Christ later, there were many Jews who see Jesus for who He truly is: *The Messiah*.

Although Simeon was nothing more than an average joe, he had some pretty impressive credentials.

Luke tells us that he was "righteous." The word uses is **δίκαιος** (de'-ki-os); which means just, upright, virtuous or one who observes divine and human laws. Throughout the NT, it is often used to describe prophets and martyrs.⁵ It's the same word used to describe Joseph (cf. Mat. 1:19), John the Baptist (cf. Mr. 6:20), and it is the same word that Pilate's wife used to describe Jesus himself (cf. Mat. 27:19). Meaning, Simeon was a blameless and law-abiding citizen.

Simeon was also "devout." Again, the Greek word used here is **εὐλαβής** (yoo-la-bace'); which means religiously faithful. Interestingly, *dikaïos* speaks more of moral uprightness, whereas *yoolabace* speaks more of religious piety. Meaning, Simeon was not only, generally speaking, a pretty good dude, but he was also an outstanding and exemplary Jew.

Simeon was not only righteous and devout but he was filled with the "Holy Spirit." This last characteristic is properly the most telling. To have the Holy Spirit upon an individual is to have favor and power with God. It was precisely because Simeon was filled with the

³ Green, Joel B., *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1997), p. 138.

⁴ Green (1997), p. 145.

⁵ Bock (1994), p. 238.

Spirit that he went to the Temple at the precise moment when Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus were there. So it wasn't only his words but his movements that were directed by the Spirit.⁶ What's more, this is the third Spirit-filled prophecy in only two chapters of Luke's Gospel. The others being Elizabeth's prophecy to Mary when they met in Chapter 1 and Zechariah's prophecy when his son John was born.

We're also told that Simeon was so righteous and so devout and so filled with the Holy Spirit that God said to him that he would see the Messiah before he dies. How remarkable to know your life would be preserved until you got to see THE promised One of God?! What sort of life had Simeon lived to be given such a reward as that? He is like a sentinel on the city's wall who was awaiting his King, and now that the King has finally come, the watcher's duty is done.⁷ His post on earth is no longer needed. It is time to be honorably discharged from service.

But it is in his prophecies where Simeon reveals the real purpose for Christ's coming:

READ: Luke 2:29-32 (ESV)

²⁹ "Lord, now [emphatic] 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."

Simeon's prophecy relays a few tidbits of information: First, now that he has seen the Messiah, he can now die. Secondly, this incarnation is in accordance with God's Word. Thirdly, the Lord's salvation taken human form is not only the glory of Israel but a revelation to the Gentiles. This last revelation is of particular interest to us. As here at the Temple—the locus of God's presence—from the mouth of a devout Jew in the audience of two faithful Jewish parents, God affirms His plan to see the non-Jewish world saved (cf. Isa. 55:5).⁸ The salvation of all peoples, not just Israel, was always a part of God's plan.

But that is not all that Simeon has to say. In fact, his prophecy to Mary is far more direct, specific, and revelatory.

READ: Luke 2:34-35 (ESV)

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

⁶ Garland (2011), p. 135.

⁷ Bock (1994), p. 241.

⁸ Green (1997), p. 146.

sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Simeon reveals **three** things about Mary’s baby boy.

First, He will be the rise and fall of many (cf. Isa. 8:14-15; 28:16). People's very existence will be affected by this child. Some will be honored. Others will be cast aside. Some will fall, and others will be vindicated. Interestingly, Jesus affirms this very prophecy in the book of Matthew.

READ: Matthew 10:34-36 (ESV)

³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

Jesus does not divide flesh and blood but hearts and households.

Secondly, He will reveal hearts. Jesus Christ is God. Nothing can be hidden from God. He sees what’s in the heart of man as easily as we see the noon-day sun. Once again, we find this prophecy’s fulfillment all throughout the Gospels.

READ: John 2:23-25 (ESV)

²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Throughout the Gospels, we are continually seeing Jesus answering the question in someone's heart rather than the questions on their lips.

Thirdly, Mary’s heart, what Simeon calls her her “soul”—the very seat of her emotions—will be pierced as if by a sword. And not just any sword, the Greek word Simeon uses (**ῥομφαία** - *rhomphaia*) is a graphic one which refers to a large, slightly curved, one-edged sword whose handle would be almost as long as the blade.⁹ In fact, the root of *rhomphaia* means to break or tear.¹⁰ It had superior cutting ability that forced many armies to reinforce their armor if they knew they’d encounter such a weapon on the

⁹ Bock (1994), p. 248.

¹⁰ General Editors, “Knight Fight: The Rhomphaia Sword (Season 1, Episode 3) | History,” *The History Channel*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w41YVv9OzWI>, [accessed December 20, 2020].

battlefield.¹¹ Looking at pictures online, it appears to be an over-engineered machete with a long enough handle that could easily accommodate two hands. The point is that Simeon was telling Mary that her baby boy would bring her extreme emotional pain someday.

Knowing what is to come, we know how true a statement that was. Only after the crucifixion will Mary truly understand Simeon's words. She will witness as her baby boy grows into a man who does miraculous things. Yet Mary will also hear how so many hate him. So much so that Christ's enemies will succeed in killing him. As Mary was there at the beginning of Christ's earthly life, she will be there at the seeming end of his life. No parent should ever have to bury their child. Yet, that is precisely what Mary does. And though Christ's death would ultimately be temporary, the trauma, emotional heartache, and despair that Mary felt were very real.

Mary, the one who heard the Son of God's first cries in Bethlehem, would also hear His last cries on Calvary. And how tragic it is for a mother to realize that her own Son would have to die in her place in order to receive forgiveness from God. This truth would be like a sword piercing her heart.

You see, any mother would've gladly taken the place of their own Son if it meant saving their life. Yet here, in this very unique way, only the Son could take His mother's place so that His own mother might be saved.

But not only are there prophetic things in the mouth of a devout man, but there are also prophetic things in the mouth of a pious prophetess.

READ: Luke 2:36-38 (ESV)

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.

ii. Anna's Testimony: The Redemption of Jerusalem

¹¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Rhomphaia," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Rhomphaia&oldid=993261393>, [accessed December 20, 2020].

Now, like Simeon, we are given some credentials about this Anna.

First, Anna had only been married for seven years and now has lived most of her life as a widow. It was common for husbands to pass away and their wives to remarry. Yet, Anna seemingly chose a widow's life, an act that would've been highly regarded at this time (cf. 1 Tim. 5:5).¹²

Secondly, Anna dedicated herself to the service of the Temple. So much so that Luke tells us, "[She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.](#)" In a Jewish context, when prayer and fasting go together in this way, it typically indicates a desire for God to right the wrongs of this world. She had spent a lifetime begging and pleading for God to send His salvation to redeem Jerusalem and her people. She, like Simeon, was hungrily awaiting God to do what He had promised He would do for His people.

To see the baby Jesus in Mary's arms was the very thing that Anna had waited for. Luke tells us she gave thanks. This thanksgiving was in response to answered prayer. God had heard her prayers and seen her fasting, like so many Jews before her, and so, in response to their pleas, God sent His Son. What's remarkable is that instead of prophesying to Joseph and Mary, as Simeon had done, Anna begins to tell anyone who would listen that the "redemption of Jerusalem" had finally come. The long years they had waited had finally come to a close. Her own life, which she dedicated to the Lord for over eighty years, would see its fulfillment in that baby boy. Imagine the joy and happiness this woman must've felt to finally have her prayers answered after so many years.

Effectively, this passage shows us that surrounding our Jesus are not only two devout and faithful Jewish parents but also two remarkable prophetic character references. These individuals represent the best that Israel has to offer. They all testify to the extraordinary nature of who Jesus was.

The Temple was the nerve center of the nation of Israel. One could easily think of that city as the heart and soul of all Jewish people. And right where Judaism is most condensed—the very epicenter for every Israelite—we find the poetic praises and sincere adoration for Jesus Christ. Worship is freely offered at the feet of the child Jesus by two very pious Israelites. The effect of these two testimonies, right at the beginning of Luke's gospel account, impresses upon us an idea: Jesus, the Christ, was not an outsider; but the rightful recipient of the glory offered by all

¹² Bock (1994), p. 252.

those who love and follow God.¹³ It doesn't matter if you are male or female. And, more shockingly, it doesn't matter if you are Jew or Gentile. This carpenter's Son was recognized by the best of the Children of Israel as the Savior for anyone who believes. They proclaimed that Jesus had come for all. It didn't matter whether you were a man or woman, Jew or Gentile, the Messiah, has come for you.

SO, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

As faithful Israelites eagerly awaited the Redeemer's **arrival**, so are faithful Christians eagerly awaiting the Redeemer's **return**.

For thousands and thousands of years, faithful Israelites, like Simeon and Anna, awaited the consolation and redemption of Israel. They read passages such as Isa. 40:9, 52:9, and 63:4, where God said he would redeem his people from this fallen world. They would believe God's word despite how long it had been since they were written. As Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah believed God would save His people, so did Simeon and Anna. All they needed to do was wait.

Likewise, we are waiting (cf. 1 Cor. 1:7; Tit. 2:13; Ju. 1:21). Not as Simeon and Anna did, who were waiting for redemption. Our Redeemer has already come. He has already redeemed. The salvation of the Lord is freely offered to all who believe in Jesus Christ. No. We are not awaiting redemption. We are awaiting the Redeemer's return.

In fact, Jesus warned us to remain vigilant and watchful for His return.

READ: Luke 21:34-36 (ESV)

³⁴ “But **watch** yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with [debauchery] and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ But **stay awake** at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

The writer of Hebrews doubles down on the idea of faithful watchfulness when he says,

READ: Hebrews 9:27-28 (ESV)

²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are **eagerly waiting** for him.

¹³ Bock (1994), p. 233.

James, the brother of Jesus, had this to say about waiting

READ: James 5:7-9 (ESV)

⁷ Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

And all those who are faithful watchers eagerly awaiting our Lord's return, there is a reward. As Paul explains...

READ: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (ESV)

⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.