



LUKE 2:21-38

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, worshipping 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.

STRUCTURE

- I. Fulfilling the Law of Moses in the Temple (2:21-24)
 - a. Obedience to the Law and the angel: Circumcision and naming (2:21)
 - b. Obedience to the Law: purification and presentation (2:22-23)
 - c. Obedience to the Law: sacrifice (2:24)
- II. The Spirit speaks through Simeon (2:25-35)
 - a. Simon's credibility: righteous character, anointing of the Spirit (2:25-26)
 - b. Simon's first prophecy (2:27-33)
 - c. Simon's second prophecy (2:34-35)
- III. The Spirit speaks through Anna (2:36-38)
 - a. Anna's credibility: prophetess, honorable genealogy, righteous character (2:36-37)
 - b. Anna's prophecy (2:38)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This section stands out because it's the first one in the narrative that focuses on Jesus, not John. Now, Jesus gets the spotlight. He, not John, is the Messiah. Jesus fulfills the Jewish Law; therefore, He also fulfills Israel's hope—and ours.

Jesus' fulfillment of the Law is an important component of Luke 2:21-24, with several OT stipulations being referenced. It's crucial for Luke that we know not only about Jesus' introduction in the temple but also about His adherence to the Law, even as an infant, under Joseph and Mary's care. Jesus was, in every respect, a Jewish baby. He was born under the Law to identify with us and to keep the Law, so He could save us.

It's no accident that after Jesus disappears from the scene as a baby, the next time we see Him, He is again in the Temple. This illustrates the tension between His earthly parents, His obedient subjection to them as a human son, and His obedience to His heavenly Father. The point of this entire section (Luke 2:21-52) is that Jesus is the obedient son of Joseph and Mary, but also the obedient Son of His Father. He perfectly lived out this tension, though it was not always comfortable for those around Him. While none of us deal with this specific tension, we all experience the tension of loving God more than our loved ones. Sometimes that tension boils over, forcing our inmost thoughts to the surface—as Simeon prophesies (2:34-35).

In Luke 2:25-38, two prophetic voices speak to Joseph and Mary—Simeon and Anna. These two share similar credibility (both are righteous) and supernatural direction (Simeon: “the Holy Spirit was upon him,” 2:25; “revealed to him by the Spirit,” 2:26; “he came in the Spirit into the temple,” 2:27; Anna: “prophetess,” 2:36). Both are ready for the revelation when it comes (Simeon: “looking for the consolation of Israel,” 2:25; “now, Lord, you are releasing your servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation,” 2:29-30; Anna: “she never left the temple, serving night and day with fasting and prayers,” 2:37). Anna also speaks to those who are ready and “looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). Throughout Luke’s Gospel, it is those who are looking, watching, waiting, and hoping—who hear from God.

What is the relationship between Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law (2:21-24) and His fulfillment of Israel’s hope, as prophesied by Simeon and Anna (2:25-38)? Just like the flow of the narrative, one leads into the other. Jesus fulfilled the Law; therefore, Jesus fulfills our every hope. The “consolation” Israel pined for (2:25) and the “redemption” Jerusalem longed for (2:38) could only be fulfilled through our Law-fulfilling Christ. Apart from Him, we are guilty lawbreakers who must suffer for our sins (Isa. 40:1-2). Having fulfilled the Law on our behalf, Jesus also suffered on our behalf, dying on a cross. Three days later He rose, offering eternal “consolation” and “redemption” to all who believe. Israel’s hope has become the world’s (cf. Luke 2:30-32).

Because Jesus paid the price, salvation is free, but this does not mean it will be easy. Simeon likens Jesus to a sword that will pierce and reveal hearts. Everyone gets pierced, but the outcome for each is different. Religious elites will be brought low, being exposed for who they are—religious phonies. “Little ones” like Joseph, Mary, Simeon, and Anna will get it, but not without pain. Swords pierce. Salvation is free, but faith in Jesus will cost us.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

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.

—“eight days... circumcised”:

- Jesus kept the Jewish law. Verses 22-24 will emphasize this.
- It was important for Jesus to keep the Jewish law, as stated in Galatians 4:4-7: *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, **born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law**, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”*
- The Son of God became a Son of Mary so that we might become sons of God.
- “adoption” reminds us of Israel, adopted as God’s son out of slavery. We had been enslaved to sin under God’s law until our redeemer led us through the Red Sea of baptism (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-2) and the Promised Land of friendship with Him.

—“he was called Jesus”: Jesus means salvation. Our adoption into God’s family through Christ amounted to salvation from slavery to sin and all that entailed, especially death.

—“the name given by the angel”: Joseph and Mary obeyed God (via the angel) to name Him. The law was given through angels (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2); so was God’s Son. Angelic appearances fill the narrative of Christ’s birth. They signal His significance.

—“before he was conceived in the womb”: a mere clump of cells was not formed in Mary’s womb—“he was”. The Second Person of the Trinity existed for eternity past, but taking on flesh, the God-man was “conceived.” He who had no beginning—began.

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.”

—“Law of Moses” (v. 22); “Law of the Lord” (v. 23); “Law of the Lord” (v. 24). Over and over, Luke emphasizes Christ’s fulfillment of the Law.

—Amazingly, Jesus needed help fulfilling the Law. As God, He never ceased to be omnipotent, upholding the universe by the power of His Word (Heb. 1:3). As a human—a baby!—He needed His parents to circumcise Him, name Him, give offerings for Him, and present Him in the temple. Jesus was a human being; therefore, He can save humans.

—He was the firstborn, which emphasizes Mary’s virginity (if He had been second-born, Mary would obviously not have been a virgin). In addition, it emphasizes Jesus as the preeminent son in the holy family.

Finally, it reveals Jesus as our new and better Israel, which God also labels His “firstborn son” (Ex. 4:22). Where Israel failed to keep the Law of Moses, our greater Israel prevailed, liberating us from the old law and for a new one—the New Covenant—which He empowers us to maintain by the Holy Spirit.

—“pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons”: this was the sacrifice for poor people. Lev. 12:8: *“And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”*

—From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus will identify with the poor (Luke 4:18). He descended to the most humble of circumstances—the lowest of the low—in order that He might relate to the lowest of the low.

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,

—Simeon means “heard”. Simeon’s prayer and hope and longing was heard by God so that he could “depart in peace”.

—“righteous and devout”: So far in the narrative, Luke has emphasized the holiness of Zechariah and Elizabeth (parents of John the Baptist), the holiness of Mary and Joseph, the holiness of Simeon, and soon, the holiness of Anna. If any of these characters had chosen to rebel against God, they would not have participated in this story. God is a God of grace, and He uses abject failures, but this does not mean our sin doesn’t matter. It has consequences. So does our righteousness.

—“waiting for the consolation of Israel”

- “consolation” is translated most often as comfort, exhortation, or encouragement.
- The word reminds us of Isa. 40:1-2: ***“Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.”*** (Note: “double” does not mean that God overpaid Israel’s sins. Far from it! He showed great grace. To pay back “double” was a Semitic idiom meaning that they had amply, but proportionally, suffered the consequences for their sins.)
- Similar to Simeon here, Joseph of Arimathea was “waiting for the kingdom of God” (23:51). Watching and waiting and hoping for God’s ultimate rescue and fulfillment is a major theme in Luke.
- Simeon was waiting, and he received the revelation (2:25-35); Anna was waiting, and she received the revelation (2:37-38); Joseph of Arimathea waited, and he received the revelation (23:51). We could add the shepherds, who kept watch over their fields by night, a symbolic image of their spiritual readiness (2:8-15). Why did “waiting” (or hoping, or longing, or praying) saints receive revelation?
 - It’s like when a quarterback throws a football to a receiver who doesn’t think the ball is coming his way. He probably won’t catch it. Likewise, we won’t be ready for the revelation if we aren’t looking to God, our hope.
 - We should be spiritually ready to receive spiritual revelation. This is not to say that God never shocks someone like He did Saul on the road to Damascus. But we can’t bank on these interventions. Luke consistently portrays those who are looking/waiting/hoping for the redemption/ consolation/fulfillment of the kingdom/Jerusalem/Israel as the ones most primed to receive revelation. I don’t want to just be knocked off my feet by an unwelcome revelation like Saul; I want to be ready. I want God to think of me as primed for revelation.
- When Simeon longed for the consolation of Israel and Anna for the redemption of Jerusalem, this meant they had placed their hope in the Messiah to make every wrong thing right in their present context. The Apostle Paul later pronounces a blessing on those who set their longing and hope on Christ’s return (1 Tim. 4:8), when every wrong will be made right, every hardship will be redeemed, and the “destroyers” are “destroyed” (Rev. 11:18). These are parallel hopes. To hope in Christ’s return parallels their hope for Christ’s first coming.
- Christ began His fulfillment of comforting Israel and redeeming Jerusalem by bringing salvation first to the Jews (Acts 1-7; cf. Rom. 1:16; 2:10). I believe the fulfillment of these Old Testament promises consummately occurs in the New Heavens and New Earth (Rev. 21-22).

—“the Holy Spirit was upon him”

- One of the primary works of the Spirit is to reveal.

- The Spirit is mentioned 3X in these short verses. V. 25: "the Holy Spirit was upon him"; v. 26: "it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit"; v. 27: "he came in the Spirit into the temple." What is Luke pointing out through this? This was not a moment of human imagination but of the Spirit's activity.
- The Holy Spirit does not just reveal; He especially reveals Jesus. The gifts of the Spirit should always point us to Jesus because the Spirit always spotlights Him.

—"He would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ": Simeon knew by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah during his lifetime. Similarly, God can reveal to His people that Christ is soon to return. Several verses in Daniel about "the end times" highlight how "the wise" will have spiritual understanding:

- Daniel 11:33: "And the wise among the people shall make many understand, though for some days they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder."
- Daniel 12:3: "And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."
- Daniel 12:10: "Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked shall act wickedly. And none of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand."

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."

—Simeon does not appear as a Levite on-duty but as a devoted Jewish man worshipping in the temple. He is like a no-name church-attender who really loves God and is moved by the Spirit to speak to someone. The story highlights an ordinary old man with great hope. These are the ones who "get it." The high and mighty will be brought low (2:34).

—"you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word":

- Simeon had been told that he would see the Lord's Christ before he died. Now that he had seen Jesus, he could die in peace because that word was fulfilled.
- Simeon felt free to die, having seen the Lord's Christ. He didn't even need to see all he would accomplish. It was enough for him just to see Jesus as an infant. What can I learn from this?
 - Could I be satisfied, deeply, with Christ alone—even without the promises fully realized? Even before the kingdom is consummated at Christ's return, can I find deep satisfaction in Jesus right now? Or, do I need "Jesus-and"?
 - We are in the same boat as Simeon. We are waiting for consolation. We're in the same boat as Anna's listeners. We're waiting for redemption. We groan. We're in-between. Yet in the midst of this "in-between", we can be satisfied to the point of being ready to "depart in peace."
 - What thing in my life MUST I see happen? What will fulfill all my hopes and dreams? Is it to see my grandkids grow up? To watch my corn pop up in rows? Or is it to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord? To see His kingdom come to earth?
 - Hope FOR almost any outcome you want. Hope IN Jesus.

—"For my eyes have seen your salvation"

- Given Simeon's hope—the consolation of Israel—he probably thinks that salvation will include something political. But he also seems to know it includes something spiritual since salvation includes "a light of revelation to the Gentiles."
- Simeon of course is not looking at "salvation." He's looking at Jesus. But Jesus is the Savior, and He is the means of salvation for all mankind.

—"which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples":

- This salvation was "prepared." God's plan had been rolled out over many generations. Jesus didn't just air-drop onto the scene at a random time in history. Luke begins his Gospel, describing it as "a narrative of the things that have been accomplished (or fulfilled) among us" (1:1). Prior to Jesus, Israel received promises. In Jesus, Israel received the One who fulfilled those promises. We live in the era of fulfillment. Because Jesus fulfilled the Law, He fulfills our every hope.
- "in the presence of all peoples": God did not do this quietly, in a corner. Nor did He restrict His redemption to Israel. God formed Israel through promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12. However, God's original vision included the whole world. Adam and Eve were to make the earth look like Eden (Gen. 1-2), but they failed (Gen. 3). The subsequent generations failed again, resulting in a global flood (Gen. 4-9). The subsequent generations failed again, resulting in a global scattering (Gen. 10-11). After three strikes, the world struck out, so God began anew with Israel (Gen. 12-50).

Unfortunately, the nation of Israel repeated the errors of the rest of the world, so God sent His greater Israel, Jesus, to fulfill the Law we all failed to keep. Jesus is the hope of Israel; He is the hope of the whole world. He earned salvation “in the presence of all peoples”—not just Israel.

- Jesus fulfills God’s vision for the world.

—“a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel”

- The Gentiles need revelation of God for they are ignorant; the Israelites need glory, for they have been put to shame. Jesus will bring both.
- Salvation, then, is not just for Israel from those evil Gentiles. It’s for all people. And it’s not just political. It’s spiritual, for it involves revelation of God and His ways.
- Mary and Joseph must’ve been thinking, “What could our Son possibly do to return Israel to glory and to be a light to the Gentiles?”

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."

—“his father and his mother marveled”:

- Their marveling is association with worship. The same Greek word appears in Luke 9:43: *“And all were astonished at the majesty of God. But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing.”*
- This theme of marveling appears throughout Luke, especially in the infancy and childhood narrative. For instance, Mary struggled to discern the angel’s message (1:29, 34), people wondered at the shepherds’ message (2:18), Mary treasured and pondered these events in her heart (2:19), Joseph and Mary marveled at Simeon’s prophecy (2:34), the religious leaders marveled at Christ’s knowledge of the Torah (2:47).
- At the end of it, Joseph and Mary did not understand why Jesus had to remain in the Temple (2:48)—“My Father’s house” as He called it (2:49). Mary responded to her misunderstanding by treasuring “all these things in her heart” (2:51), which is the second time Luke mentions it (cf. 2:19).
- The marveling emphasizes Christ’s significance.
- Since the marveling was accompanied by misunderstandings, it also serves as an exhortation. It’s not enough to marvel. We must ponder, ruminate, meditate, chew on—treasure these things in our heart—until God gives us understanding.

—“the fall and rising of many in Israel”:

- The lower classes, the infirm, the broken, the deprived—they will all rise up and form a mighty army in God’s kingdom. Fishermen, zealots, tax-collectors, and shepherds will soon be apostles, with their names inscribed on the foundation stones of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14).
- The religious leaders will be brought low. The wealthy, privileged, elites will despise Jesus because His fame threatens them.
- Wealth, fame, privilege, and status make it hard to see truth or love Jesus. It is the wealthy church in Laodicea that cannot see its own nakedness (Rev. 3:17). I’m reminded of Proverbs 30:8-9: *“Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.”*

—“a sign that will be opposed”:

- As a sign, what does Jesus signify? He signifies where you stand with God. Those who “opposed” Jesus opposed the Father—despite their theological and religious pedigree. Those who received Jesus received the Father.
- Those who opposed Him by that opposition revealed their hearts. When the religious leaders opposed Jesus, their true carnal nature came out. These “holy” men demanded the torture and death of God’s Holy One.

—“and a sword will pierce through your own soul also”:

- What is the sword that will pierce Mary’s heart?
 - Heb. 4:12-13: *“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account.”*

- In that day, a sword was a metaphor for revelatory judgment. Just like swords cut people open to reveal their insides, God's Word is a sword that slices people "so that the thoughts from many hearts"—not just Mary's heart—"will be revealed" (Luke 2:35).
- As a "sign that will be opposed", Jesus will signify where people stand with God. Religious elites would fall, for their thoughts toward God only seemed holy; in truth, they were wicked. In contrast, the humble and lowly (such as Joseph and Mary) would be lifted up, for their thoughts toward God would be revealed by the sword and sign of Jesus. Their thoughts toward God were pure.
- Even the mother of our Lord would be called to a decision: would she trust her Son for eternal life despite all of the "letdowns" she faced? (no room in the inn, no affirmation of religious or political leaders, public scorn as an adulteress, criticisms against her Son, etc.). "I'm calling even you, Mary, to trust the One on that cross to forgive your sins and to give you life." Mary had to believe in a way that transcended her misunderstandings.
- The sword represented not just a revealing of the heart but a *painful* revealing of the heart. This metaphor speaks of the cross. In that day, people often spoke of the pain of a child by referencing the pain the mother goes through (cf. 1 Sam. 15:33). Swords are painful. The cross would pierce Mary's heart with pain, and it would reveal her thoughts—whether she believed or not. God is preparing her heart for a very different experience than she expects. Birthing the Messiah is not all bells and whistles. Walking in God's favor never is.
- If Mary was not omitted from the sword, neither will any of us avoid it. Everyone suffers the thought-revealing sword. At some point, Jesus calls us to make a decision for Him that costs us. This crucified Savior is also our Lord, and He will place us in situations where we have to decide for Him, and doing so will reveal our true heart. Will we choose Christ over fudging on taxes? Will we choose Christ over staying silent? Will we choose Christ over our job? Our security? Our comfort? Our flexibility? Our friends? Our family? To be a disciple is to take up our own cross and follow Jesus down the hard and narrow road. Taking up that cross involves rejection from those closest to us. Jesus never ceased to be a sword.
- The "rising and falling" Simeon prophesied would include Mary. It's an emphatic message that no one is exempt from exaltation or humbling of the cross. No one is exempt from the soul-piercing sword. Today, we make friendship with God rosy, but there's nothing rosy about getting stabbed.
- Everything about this story is cheery... except this. What is the role of these verses in the flow of the greater story, which is about fulfillment? Consolation would come with a price. Jesus would be crucified. It wasn't just, "Yay, our Hero will come and deliver us!" This story gives us a picture of what that fulfillment, that consolation, that redemption, would cost—the life of this blessed child. Further, the glory for Israel and revelation for the world would not be all peaches and cream and yellow brick roads. The glory and revelation would come, but it would center upon the decision we all must make—Mary included—for Jesus.
- This does not mean that salvation "costs" us something. I don't have to pay for pardoned sins (cf. Is. 40:2). It does mean, however, that the cross of Jesus will pierce me too. **God's favor does not just mean extra blessing; it means extra piercing.** I will be tested, and the sword will reveal my true thoughts about God.
- Jesus is our consolation, but consolation is costly: for Him and for us.
- Consolation is costly to me, not because I have to pay to receive it. Consolation is costly to me because the faith I exercise to receive it will be tested.

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.

—"And there was a prophetess, Anna": The "and" continues Luke's thought. Simeon and Anna form a pair. Both are in the temple. Both receive prophetic revelation. Both are righteous. Both are weak and lowly. Both speak of a future for God's people. Both recognize the Christ child.

—Her revelation is connected with (fasting and) prayer. This is a common theme in Luke/Acts (Luke 2:25-27; 2:37-38; 3:21-22; 9:28-29; Acts 10:9-16; 13:2-3).

—For "redemption of Jerusalem" see comments in 2:25 about the "consolation of Israel."