

The Presentation of Jesus

A Commentary on Luke 2:21-40

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21

**On the eighth day,
when it was time to circumcise him,**

Jewish law required the parents to circumcise a newborn boy on the eighth day of his life. They circumcised a baby boy in order to commit him to a covenant relationship with God and identify him with the covenant community. God instituted the practice of “brit milah” (Covenant of Circumcision) when He made His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:10-14).

Leviticus 12 specifies what a woman is to do after she gives birth to a son:

- She is religiously unclean or impure for seven days after childbirth.
- On the eighth day, the boy is to be circumcised.
- The woman must wait thirty three days to be purified from her bleeding.
- After this purification period, she is to bring a lamb to the priest to sacrifice.

**he was named Jesus,
the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.**

Back in chapter 1, vs. 31, Gabriel told Mary to name her child Jesus, which means “God saves.”

22

**When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed,
Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord**

23

**(as it is written in the Law of the Lord,
“Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”),**

Exodus 13:2

The Lord said to Moses,

“Consecrate to me every firstborn male.

The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal.”

24

**and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord;
“a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”**

Leviticus 12:6 – 8

When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the Lord to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood. These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.

That Joseph and Mary brought a pair of doves or two young pigeons instead of a lamb confirms that they were poor peasants.

25

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. he was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

So far, Luke has emphasized that Joseph and Mary obeyed Gabriel by naming their son Jesus and that they did everything they were required to do under the Laws that God gave Israel long many centuries before this. Now he emphasizes that Simeon was righteous and devout. This reminds us of how he made sure we knew that Zechariah and Elizabeth were “upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” Jesus will later say that He did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17)

They did not see themselves as above or beyond the Law. Observing the Law was a non-negotiable. They would uphold their side of God’s covenant relationship with them. God was behind the Law and keeping the Law was a way of enjoying God’s provision and protection. We also realize from these passages that God is not above His own Law. He established the Law as a framework through which he would bless His people. Everything is going according to the Law that God established.

However, the Law and following the Law perfectly is not enough. God makes things happen through the work of His Spirit. Next, we will see the intersection of Law and Spirit. We saw this intersection of Law and Spirit in the story of Zachariah in the temple. He was a priest who was born and raised to live by the Law and help others live by the Law. He followed the Law as perfectly as a man could. Yet that was not enough. Gabriel came to him to announce that God’s Spirit was moving and would by His grace give him a son in a miraculous way. When that son was born the Holy Spirit filled him and he spoke a prophecy that provided divine perspective on John’s birth and life ahead.

We saw the intersection of Law and Spirit in Gabriel's announcement to Mary that the Holy Spirit would miraculously create an embryo in her womb without the use of a biological father. All this would happen without violating the Law concerning marital fidelity. The Holy Spirit filled Mary as well and she spoke a prophecy about what God would accomplish through Jesus the Messiah.

We saw an intersection between man's laws and God's Spirit when Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem in obedience to Caesar Augustus' census. After Mary gave birth to Jesus in the most humble of places, the feeding trough inside a peasant home, angels appeared to shepherds to announce the peace that God was securing and offering to all men through Jesus.

The message is clear Yahweh God is the one and only true God and He is strategically and powerfully carrying out His perfect plan behind the curtain that hides His heavenly dimension from ours. The mundane, ordinary activities of human life like the circumcision, naming and presentation of Jesus at the Temple is the stage of an exciting divine drama. This is it, God is breaking in like a thief. The heavenly kingdom is breaking into people's lives, minds and hearts and that is nothing like an earthly empire advancing across the land. It is much more powerful and Jesus' reign will last forever.

Here we see another intersection between Law and Spirit. Simeon is probably a priest like Zechariah, although to Luke, this was not important. Luke describes him as righteous and devout. Next, the Holy Spirit will reveal to Him what the Law cannot.

26

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

27

**Moved by the Spirit,
he went into the temple courts.**

**When the parents brought in the child Jesus
to do for him what the custom of the Law required,**

28

Simeon took him in his arms and praised god, saying:

29 - 32

"Sovereign Lord,

Simeon understands and correctly affirms that Yahweh God is sovereign in all the affairs of men and is right now unfolding His perfect plan. No one can stop Him or out-manuever Him.

**as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.**

We do not know how God revealed to Simeon that he would have a role in this drama before he died. We don't know how many long years he might have waited in faith and expectation. We don't know if he wavered in doubt or if he persevered with unwavering faith. What really matters is that when the critical time came to trust and obey God he did.

**For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,**

God has now put this agent of salvation onto the public stage of humanity. The process of securing salvation for people is not to be done in a smoke-filled backroom up in heaven. It will take place for all to witness, for all to scrutinize and for all to have the chance to either reject it or receive it.

a light for revelation to the Gentiles

Simeon's theme is God's salvation for all people. According to a Jewish worldview there were and still are two categories of humanity: Jews and Gentiles. Jesus would not just be the instrument of salvation for the people of Israel but for all people, including the Gentiles. When God made His covenant with Abraham 2000 years before this He told Abraham that all the nations would be blessed through his descendants. By this time, however, many Jews hated the Gentiles so much that they ignored this or thought in terms of a Jewish government that would rule over the Gentiles with an iron fist. Simeon, however, is not talking about oppressive rule but salvation.

A few weeks ago when we examined Zechariah's prophecy, we found a similar imagery of light. Zechariah used the imagery of a rising sun or dawn, combining several images from the Old Testament: a luminary, illumination and a sunrise were all applied to the Messiah. In a similar way, Simeon reminds this group of Isaiah's prophecy.

Isaiah (60:1-3) applied the imagery of illumination to the Messiah:

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.
nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Exodus 13:21 uses "light" as a metaphor for God's presence:

By day the Lord went ahead of them ... by night in a pillar of fire to give them light...

Psalms 27:1 uses light as a metaphor for salvation:

The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?

Now in Luke 2:32, Simeon calls Jesus: “a light for revelation to the Gentiles”

God is now revealing His plan and offer of salvation to the Gentiles.

At the same time however, God’s justice and judgment will fall on those who reject His salvation. Light is also used by Isaiah to refer to God’s judgment on the Gentile nations that oppress Israel.

Isaiah 51:4, 5

Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
The law will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.
My righteousness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.

and for glory to your people Israel.”

The word glory carries the meaning of honor. God is honoring His promise to Israel, thereby bringing honor to her. At this time, Israel is low. An oppressive Gentile empire rules her and does not seek to honor her. God is coming to her rescue—to restore her honor.

33

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him.

Can you imagine how stunned you would be if this happened to you totally without warning? Sure, they had already witnessed some amazing things, but I don’t think they were getting used to them just yet. An old man walks up to you out of the crowd, takes your precious baby out of your arms and delivers a prophecy that says your son is the long-awaited Messiah! Angels have already said this, Elizabeth said this, and now a strange old man says it. I want to point out two things about this. First, these multiple attestations of who Jesus is will help them remember who Jesus is as he is growing up in their family as well as remind them of who he is when he is ministering to people and dying on the cross. Second, Joseph and Mary were not alone. There would have been other friends and family members present as well as other worshippers standing around. The friends and relatives of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds, the town of Bethlehem, and now the people around them in the temple all had advanced notice that Israel’s Messiah was here in the form of a baby. They would have to wait another 30 years for Jesus to begin His public ministry. Some of them like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna would be gone, but the younger ones would remember. Some would become Jesus’ earliest followers.

So far, Simeon has made only a general statement about Jesus being the savior of the world. Now he looks Mary in the eye and addresses her directly, personally and ... tragically.

34 - 35

**Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother:
“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel,**

This is an allusion to Isaiah’s prophecy that described how many in his own day rejected God and His ways.

Isaiah 8:14-15

and (the Lord Almighty) will be a sanctuary;
but for both houses of Israel he will be
a stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.
And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.
Many of them will stumble;
they will fall and be broken,
they will be snared and captured.

Isaiah had to deliver this unwelcome news to the people of his day. Simeon had to deliver this unwelcome news to Mary and the people of Israel in her day. However, there is still a glimmer of hope here. Although some would stumble and fall because of their rejection of Jesus, some would receive Him and be lifted up just as Mary’s prophecy had said.

For them God will be a cornerstone for a sure foundation.

Isaiah 28:16:

So this is what the Sovereign Lord says:
“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who trusts will never be dismayed.”

Both Matthew, Mark and Luke will relate how Jesus used this ancient symbolism to speak of the fulfillment of Simeon’s prophecy about some falling and some rising. Jesus quotes Psalm 118. Here is how Matthew records it:

Matthew 21:42-43

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures?
‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’”

“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

Jesus was saying all of this to chief priests and Pharisees. They were the leaders of Israel—the stewards of God’s kingdom. If they reject the Messiah that God has sent God will take the kingdom away from them and give it to others who will do something productive with it. It is in this way that Jesus will “cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.”

and to be a sign that will be spoken against,

Another way of translating this would be “a sign that is opposed.” The image here might be similar to a banner or flag on the battlefield. For some it is a banner that signals salvation while for those who oppose it, it is a signal of defeat, loss and destruction. Building on this, it could mean that Jesus’ coming into our world from heaven is a tangible sign that God exists and will judge people for their rebellion against Him. Many people will oppose this sign of God’s existence.

so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.

This part of the sentence begins with “so that” which shows that a person’s true orientation toward or away from God is the crucial matter. Jesus will fulfill this when he later tells a crowd:

“There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.” (Luke 12:2, 3)

It is both a sobering fact and a comforting fact that God knows all of our thoughts and feelings about Him. For the person who rejects Him there is no amount of posing that will veil their secret orientation. That person might be posing as the most religious or most humanitarian person in the world, but inside they are dead set against God. One day God will reveal their true motives. On the other hand, God will reveal our true heart as well. We might be shy by nature and not let many people know how much we love God and surrender our lives to Him. Even so, God will one day reveal our hearts and reward us for persevering with faith, hope and love. This does not mean we have a ready excuse to not speak up, but no one is perfect, and that is what God’s grace is for.

And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

These statements bear the point of crisis in this story. Until now, all the prophecies have been full of good news. Everyone is happy. They’re passing out the cigars, passing out the drinks. Opah! Everyone is congratulating Mary and Joseph on being the lucky ones chosen by God to bear and raise the Messiah who would make everything in the world right again. Who would have thought that even one of God’s people would reject this Messiah? From the powerful leaders to the powerless poor, Israel is begging for God’s compassionate mercy, for God’s Savior, for God’s deliverance, for God’s kingdom on earth. Again, who would reject this Savior?

The facts will bear out that many did and now do reject him. When people meet Jesus, hear His words, see His miracles, feel His judgment of their sins, feel His compassion for their suffering, and hear that He rose from the dead they experience a point of crisis. They intuitively know God requires them to either receive Him or reject Him.

Simeon's prophecy brought tragic news that would simmer in the back of Mary's mind for years to come, both wondering and dreading how they would be fulfilled. These words must have come back to haunt her many times as Jesus was growing up and then during His public ministry when the Jewish leaders opposed Him and then especially when He was arrested and crucified.

36 - 37

**There was also a prophetess, Anna,
the daughter of Phanuel,
of the tribe of Asher.
She was very old;
she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,
and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.
She never left the temple but worshiped night and day,
fasting and praying.**

We may assume that as a prophetess, Anna, will give Mary, Joseph and those around them at this time God's infallible perspective on their child. We don't know anything about Phanuel and the tribe of Asher was not as significant as other tribes. Even so, she knew her heritage as a Jew.

If she got married when she was twelve years old like most Jewish women then her husband died when she was nineteen years old. Now she is eighty-four, so she has been a widow for sixty-five years. What is significant though is that she spent everyday in the Temple worshipping, fasting and praying. Even though she did not have an enviable pedigree like Zechariah and Elizabeth she dedicated her entire life, night and day, to God and that is saying something. She was not bound by the Law of God or the invented laws of the priests and Pharisees to live this way. She chose to live this way. This is all to say that her lifestyle gave her more credibility than any title or the religious devotion to hundreds of regulations.

38

**Coming up to them at that very moment,
she gave thanks to God
and spoke about the child
to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.**

Anna's role in this whole affair is to tell others the Messiah is finally here. We can imagine that over the years Anna met many other Jews at the Temple who came to worship in spirit and in truth. She knows the ones who will genuinely welcome the Messiah, the ones who really care about the redemption of Jerusalem and Israel. Perhaps she and Simeon had spoken many times before about God's promise to Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he dies. Perhaps she

and her friends were in the crowd of people who were at the Temple when Zechariah came out speechless and deaf and trying to communicate what Gabriel told him.

In that culture, a woman who lost her husband could find herself alone to fend for herself. We don't know if she didn't have the ability or opportunity to remarry or if it was a choice or calling. We don't know if her family could not take her back in to provide for her and find her a new husband. But obviously, God turned the despair of her loss into a ministry of hope. He providentially placed her there in that Temple to tell others about God's promises and encourage them to have faith.

Luke doesn't even quote her words to Mary and Joseph. Apparently, she gave some kind of thanks to God and then went to tell other people about Jesus. Her credentials as a woman who lived for God for sixty-five years are enough to assure us that many people would believe her word.

This is the climax of the story, the point that resolves the crisis. Even though Simeon delivered the news that Jesus would bring a point of crisis to the people of Israel and that Mary would be hurt by this in the process Anna delivers the good news of the Savior's birth to those who will receive it in their hearts.

39

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord,

Luke emphasizes one last time that everything went according to the Law of the Lord. There was no hanky panky. There was no favoritism. There was no backroom deal that exempted anyone from God's Laws. God will accomplish His purposes through people who obey Him. Luke assures us that Joseph and Mary will raise Jesus in a home that lives by God's Law. In this way, God will protect and provide for them.

they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.

I don't know if you've noticed (and someone had to point it out to me) that at the end of each story, Luke clears the stage to prepare for the next story.

40

**And the child grew and became strong;
he was filled with wisdom,
and the grace of God was upon him.**

Additional notes:

This event involving Simeon and Anna also signals the beginning of the end for the Jerusalem Temple as the physical and spiritual center of God's involvement in Israel along with its sacrificial system. Simeon and Anna were old and seem to represent the end of a generation that looked and waited expectantly for the Lord to "come to His temple." (Malachi 3:1)

This event continues to show that God's Spirit is suddenly active in the human realm again. Jesus compared the Spirit to a wind. We cannot predict or control Him. We can only either resist Him or be directed and empowered by Him.

Application: