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Series: *The First Songs of Christmas*

Title: *"Simeon's Song"*

Preacher: Mark Adams

Scripture: Luke 2:25-35

This week I read about an NYU professor named Adam Alter who believes that the names we are given at birth have the power to shape our lives. He calls his theory, *"nominative determinism,"* which literally means, *"name-driven outcome."* Dr. Alter says the names we give our children can even push them toward a specific career. And he cites several examples.

First, from the legal field.

- The current Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales is Justice Igor Judge.
- His colleague, a judge in the Court of Appeals is Lord Justice Laws.

When it comes to famous athletes there is:

- A professional tennis player from Israel named: Anna Smashnova.
- Layne Beachley is a seven-time world champion surfer.
- Derek Kickett is an Australian Rules footballer.
- Stephen Rowbotham was an Olympic rower for Britain.
- And Usain Bolt currently reigns as the fastest man in the world.

Other examples of the power of a name include:

- Daniel Snowman, the author of a book about the Arctic and Antarctica
- Christopher Coke, a notorious Jamaican drug dealer
- The rapper Black Rob who was sentenced to seven years in prison for grand larceny, and
- Dr. A.J. Splatt, a doctor of urology.

What do you think of Alter's theory? Are all of these name-career matches just coincidences? Would Usain Bolt run just as fast if his name was Usain Plod? Alter says no. He writes, *"Researchers have shown that our names take root deep within our mental worlds, drawing us magnetically towards the concepts they embody."*

I don't agree with Dr. Alter, I mean, his name didn't push him to be a priest, spending his life serving at the altar. But, I share his theory because the singer of this week's song of Christmas definitely lives up to HIS name. I'm referring to Simeon. I'll explain how Simeon reflects his life in a moment, but first let's get the setting of this chapter of the Christmas story in our minds.

Our text again is from Luke's Gospel and he wrote to a Gentile audience, which is good for you and me because in Luke 2:21-24 he takes the time to explain what happened and why in the first few days of our Lord's life so that non-Jewish readers like us can understand. Here's a quick synopsis. In Luke 2:21 we are told that, in obedience to the law in Leviticus 12, on the eighth day of His life Joseph and Mary had the infant born on Christmas Day, circumcised. The law also said this was the time to give a newborn a name and once again in obedience to God's instruction through Gabriel, they gave Him the name *"Jesus."* In verses 22-24 Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for the purification rites of His mother, according to the Law of Moses. This would have taken place 33 days AFTER Jesus' circumcision. At this point the parents were to make atonement for Mary by sacrificing a lamb or two turtle doves or two young pigeons if they could not afford a lamb. Luke tells us they brought the latter, so we know they were poor.

These two legal observances remind us that as Paul said to the Galatians concerning Jesus' birth:

"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." (Galatians 4:4-5, ESV).

And throughout His life, Jesus obeyed God's law as given to the writers of the Old Testament. For example, every year our Lord and His disciples would celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. But 33 years later, Jesus would redeem those under the Law by ratifying the New Covenant through His blood shed on the cross, so we can be adopted as sons and daughters of God.

It is important to note that Mary and Joseph obeyed the law of God. I mean, they could have thought they were exempt since they were raising the Messiah in their home, but no, they faithfully did as God had commanded.

Well, this is where Simeon enters the Christmas story because as Joseph and Mary came into the temple on that 41st day to make the required sacrifice for Mary's purification, Simeon approached them.

Now, think about it. As a young parent, how would you respond to a toothless old stranger whose hygiene may have lapsed over the past half century, who comes up to you and reaches out to take your baby from your arms?

I remember when we took Daniel in for his first check up a couple weeks after his birth back in 1983. When we were in the elevator at one floor this toothless old woman got on. She looked and smelled a lot like the witch in Snow White and when she saw Daniel she asked if she could hold him. I remember taking a step back, shaking my head and saying, "no..."

Well Simeon was not a crazy old man. Luke tells us he was righteous and devout. And perhaps sensing that, Mary and Joseph apparently gave him permission, which shows how in tune to the Holy Spirit they were. That takes us to our text. If you haven't already done so, take your Bibles, turn to Luke 2 and follow along as I read. We're starting at the last half of verse 25:

Luke 2:25-35

25 - "[Simeon] was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

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

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 - "Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You may now dismiss Your servant in peace.

30 - For my eyes have seen Your salvation,

31 - which You have prepared in the sight of all nations:

32 - a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."

33 - The Child's father and mother marveled at what was said about Him.

34 - Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This Child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,

35 - so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Now, Simeon's name may or may not have influenced the way he lived his life, but it certainly reflected it. You see, his name means, "Trust and obey" and the story of his song of Christmas shows us that this name described Simeon to a tee.

1.) First, we can see that he lived a life of TRUST.

I don't know when God made him this promise that he would not die until he saw the Messiah, but I get the impression it was early in his long life. So Simeon spent many years, probably decades, believing God's promise would one day be fulfilled. He lived a LIFE of trust. Even though his body was aging and failing as all aging bodies do, Simeon had a strong, YOUNG spirit because the TRUST - the hope that was in him, was greater than the hopelessness that was all around him in Israel.

Simeon's song is called "Nunc Dimittis" which is Latin for "Now You can dismiss me...I'm ready to die." But others call it "The song of the waiter" because that's who Simeon was, a man who was ABLE to wait and wait and wait and wait--- because he trusted God, believed He would eventually keep His promise.

This is one thing we can learn from Simeon because, let's admit it, we have a hard time waiting. Back in 1991 a couple weeks after the Gulf War started, I went back to my former church in Delaware to attend a funeral. When I pulled up to the funeral home, one of the men from the church was there to greet me. His name was Al Hillier. Al had flown B-17's in WWII and as I came up to him, he said, "Mark, look at this newspaper headline about the Gulf War." I looked and the headline read, "War Drags On." Al said, "This war is only two weeks old and they complain about it dragging on! When we left to fight in WW2 we were gone FOUR YEARS!" We both had a laugh. But it's proof we aren't good at waiting and that's not a good thing for, as Lewis Smeades puts it:

"Waiting is our destiny. As creatures who cannot by themselves bring about what they hope for, we wait in the darkness for a flame we cannot light. We wait in fear for a happy ending we cannot write. We wait for a 'not yet' that feels like a 'not ever.'"

We do indeed do a lot of waiting don't we? And it is hard. I'm sure your kids are even now having a hard time waiting for Christmas morning to come. I know I had a hard time when I was little. We literally marked off the days on a paper calendar and then when we woke on Christmas Eve we counted the hours. It was so hard to wait.

And waiting is still hard. Wouldn't you agree? I mean, when things don't happen fast, it feels like time is dragging on. "Dragging on" --- don't those two words describe this past year?

Time DRAGGED ON AS...

- We waited for our retirement accounts to recover.
- We waited for stores to get TP and Purell.
- We got sick and waited in line to get a test for Covid-10 and then waited for the test results to come.
- We waited for this Vaccine and even though it is the fastest ever developed and is here now, most of us will wait several more months to get our shots.

That's just an example from this year---as Smeades says, all of LIFE is full of waiting.

Well, how do we do that? How do we wait? What does it take for us to have the kind of faith and trust in God that Simeon had? Simeon would say developing that kind of trust requires us to study the Bible. If he were here this morning, he'd probably say, "Do what you SAY you will do every Sunday at the end of a service: **'Let the WORD of Christ dwell in you richly!'** It has worked for me!"

We know that studying God's written Word was something Simeon did because in his short song of Christmas he quoted the Old Testament several times. Like the mother whose baby he held, Simeon had obviously meditated on God's written Word. READING---MEDITATING on the Scripture helps us develop this caliber of TRUST in two ways.

a. First, it helped us learn to THINK the way God THINKS.

Simeon's study of all the Messianic prophecies made it was easier for Him to see both where and HOW God was at work. In this way he learned to "think God's thoughts after Him" as Kepler put it. It works for us in the same way.

Do you remember the movie *Patton*? There's a scene toward the beginning where General Patton is fighting the German General Rommel in the deserts of North Africa. Patton has carefully set a trap and Rommel's army rolls right into it. When he sees that victory is at hand Patton says something like, "I beat you Rommel---because I read your book!" He was referring to a book Rommel had written in the 1930's entitled *Infantry Attacks*. Since he had read it, Patton KNEW how Rommel thought, knew how he planned his attacks and Patton planned his trap accordingly.

Well, SIMEON was more sensitive to the "tactics," the workings of our Almighty God was because he had read HIS book. And, if we are to WAIT as Simeon did, trust as Simeon did, we too must be students of God's written Word. Remember, this is not just a book, it is GOD'S book He wrote it. As 2nd Peter 1:21 says, "**Prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.**" This principle of trust is what Paul is referring to in Romans 12:2 when he says that in order to know what God is up to, if we are to better "**understand what the will of God is...**" we must "**...renew our minds.**"

And, as I said, Simeon lived by this principle. He was well-acquainted with the written Word of God and that helped Him to understand and SEE things that others missed. He learned that as 2nd Timothy 2:7 says, when we study God's Word, ***"...the Lord will grant full insight and understanding in everything."***

But Simeon would say the Scriptures not only help us learn to think the way God thinks,

b. It also helps us learn to SEE the way God SEES.

You see, our sight, our perspective on life, is very limited. But not God's. He can see everything, everywhere, in all times, ALL the time! And Simeon's time in God's Word helped him to understand this and that deepened his trust in God.

Do you remember Tolkien's *The Hobbit*? Good, do you remember the part where Bilbo and the Dwarves are going through the forest called Mirkwood? It's a thick forest, so thick it's dark on the forest floor even in the daytime. Time seems to stand still and as their journey through this darkness stretches into weeks, they begin to fear they are lost. So, they make Bilbo climb a tree high up, high enough to get above the canopy so he can see where they are. He does that and can see their destination in the distance, the Lonely Mountain where the dwarves are headed to reclaim their home from Smaug.

Well, God doesn't have to "climb a tree." He's already "up there." And of course, I'm not referring to altitudinal height. Our Heavenly Father is literally ABOVE time itself. He can see ALL our lives, all of EVERYONE'S lives, ALL the time. So, as we read a moment ago, God could see when ***"in the fulness of time"*** it was the PERFECT time in history to send Jesus into our world.

Simeon's study of the Scriptures enabled him to humbly trust in God's perspective, no matter how long he had to wait to understand it. We must learn to do the same. We must remember that God is the Creator. We are His creation. He is the Potter. We are the clay. God is infinitely more intelligent and loving than we are, so it only makes sense to trust His perspective on everything we deal with in life. Like Simeon we must embrace the words of the psalmist, ***"I trust in You, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in Your hands."*** (Psalm 31:14-15a)

We must cling to Jesus' promise in Luke 18:7 where He said, ***"God will always give what is right to His people who cry to Him night and day, and He will not be slow [according to His perfect timing] to answer them."*** When we experience seemingly endless times of waiting we need the patience of the man who prayed, ***"God, I cannot grasp Your mind, but with my whole heart I trust Your love."***

Mary would have to learn to embrace that trust, for as Simeon prophesied, it would not be easy to be the mother of the Messiah. Jesus would cause, ***"the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."*** Simeon wasn't referring to a literal sword, but this "symbolic" sword thrust would hurt more, for Simeon was talking about that day she would look up at her Son, hanging on a cross.

So, Simeon lived up to his name in that he trusted; but also

2.) Simeon lived a life of OBEDIENCE.

I imagine Simeon was in the Temple every day of those years, from opening to closing; looking, examining every couple who came in with a baby, asking God, ***"Is that Him?"***

And for years and years and years, all he heard was ***"No---keep looking."*** That's what he did.

He probably kissed more babies than a presidential candidate, many times over. Simeon kept at it---He continued to listen to God's Spirit---continued to obey and go into the temple courts looking. And then one day the Holy Spirit finally tapped him on the shoulder and said, ***"Simeon---see the baby in that woman's arms? THAT'S HIM! THAT'S THE MESSIAH!"*** At this point, Simeon scooted over to Mary and Joseph as fast as his ancient legs would permit. Then He took Jesus in His age-spotted arms, praised God, and sang his song of Christmas.

Simeon lived up to that aspect of His name---He OBEYED God. He wasn't just a HEARER of the WORD, he was a DOER of it as well. He OBEYED the commands of God that are found on its pages. He obeyed God's Spirit when instructed.

Do you remember how an X-ball paintball tournament works? Participants are armed with sophisticated paintball guns that shoot 13 paintballs per second which makes the matches are quick and exciting. But they're also chaotic. The X-ball concept depends on five players from each team shooting at their opponents and working their way up a large outdoor field. The goal is to "kill" (that is, hit with a paintball) the other team's players so you can capture their flag. But it's not an easy task.

First, in the midst of thousands of flying paintballs it's tough to spot your opponents. The other team can crouch and dive behind bunkers and barriers. To make matters even worse, as your team's coach shouts the right information about your opponents' locations, the other team's fans start yelling false information. It sounds like cheating but that's part of the game. It's called "counter-coaching." The other teams' coach and fans try to distract the opposing team players with false information. So to win, you have to focus on YOUR coach and DO what HE says to do.

Of course, we deal with "counter-coaching" in the real world all the time. It's "part of the game" of life and Simeon would say there is only one way to win; Know God's Word so you can recognize His voice and then trust and obey, even when the crowd tells us to do something else. To quote Paul's letter to the Romans, we don't "**conform to this world.**" Rather with minds renewed by the Word of God, we are transformed and we show that transformation as we obey God's will.

So, Alter's theory is proved true in Simeon's life. He lived up to the meaning of his name. He is someone who TRUSTED GOD and OBEYED GOD all his life.

Did you note the consequence of SIMEON being a person of trust in and obedience to God? Living his long life that way made him ready when his life came to an end, as all our lives will some day if the Lord tarries. Hear the words of Simeon's song again,

"Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You may now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all nations---a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."

Trusting God's promise, obeying His Spirit's leading, made it possible for Simeon to see His Savior - OUR Savior. He believed Jesus was the Messiah come to save us from our sin. Nothing but trust in Jesus prepares us to say what Simeon sang. Only through faith in Jesus can we say, *"God, I'm ready to go---dismiss Your servant in peace. I'm coming Home."*

In *Leadership Journal* a few years ago, Elizabeth Diffin wrote an article about a unique evangelism program called, *"Last Minute Ministry."* She writes:

"The ministry began when a friend of pastor Chuck Kent asked him to visit his dying, 92-year-old great-grandfather in the hospital. The elderly man, Elwyn, was agnostic. Chuck met with him and asked if he could share one of Jesus' stories. He told the story of the vineyard owner who hired people to work in the last hour. He told Elwyn that he was also in the '11th hour,' and that day Elwyn prayed to accept Christ. A week later, Pastor Chuck conducted Elwyn's funeral. One hundred family members and friends heard the gospel at the service. When Chuck's daughters pointed out that there were others on the terminal floor that needed to hear the gospel, Chuck got special permission from the hospital to visit. He went room-to-room, asking each person if he could pray with him or her and then share the story of the 11th hour. In one month, he visited 15 people, 8 of whom accepted Christ. During one of those visits, Chuck was called to minister to a comatose man who had only a few hours to live. The man was unable to speak or open his eyes. Instead, Chuck lead him through the prayer of salvation by having him squeeze Chuck's hand one phrase at a time. Two hours later, the patient died. Commenting on the ministry, Pastor Chuck says: 'We started it off not intending for it to be ongoing. But the church got excited; it took off amazingly. It's an easy ministry to see progress, because these people are getting ready to die.' He added, 'People on the terminal floor are a lot more realistic about eternity.'"

Let me ask, are you READY to die? Could you sing Simeon's song? If not, you can. All you need to do is admit to God that you are fallen, an imperfect being who sins, disobeys God. Tell Him you believe Jesus is His Son and that He died on the cross in your place. Confess to God Your desire to follow Jesus as Lord.

Let's pray.