

REDISCOVER THE SURPRISING WITNESSES

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Luke 2:21-38

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INTRO.

-- Intro. Song

-- Christmas is a marvelous time for creating memories. For many of us here today, some of our most vivid and cherished memories are those associated with Christmas.

-- That certainly must have been true for Mary. Think of the memories that Mary had that were connected to the birth of Jesus:

- The visit by the angel Gabriel to announce that she would be the mother of the Messiah
- The appearance of the angel to Joseph to tell him that the baby Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit
- Mary's visit to her elderly cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant with a son who would be John the Baptist
- The birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem that was attended by shepherds who told the amazing story of an angelic announcement accompanied by an angelic choir

-- Luke 2:19 says that Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." One of Mary's treasured memories was an event that occurred about a month after Jesus' birth. It's an incident that Luke tells as a part of the accounts of Jesus' birth. In fact, Luke records it immediately after the story of the shepherds, but it's rarely included in our telling of the Christmas story. This often overlooked part of the Christmas story is found in Luke 2:21-38.

I. THE SETTING (VV. 21-24)

-- There are three Jewish ceremonies that were connected to the birth of a son mentioned here in these verses.

A. CIRCUMCISION

-- The first ceremony is circumcision, which for all Jewish males took place eight days after birth. At the time of the circumcision the parents also make the official announcement of the boy's name. Luke tells us that the name given to Mary's baby was the name that the angel had instructed them to give, the name Jesus, which means the Lord saves.

B. THE PURIFICATION OF THE MOTHER

-- The second ceremony is the purification of the mother. After giving birth to a son, a woman was considered religiously and ceremonially unclean for a period of 40 days. At the end of those 40 days, she had to participate in a purification ceremony in order to be pronounced religiously clean. That ceremony is described in Leviticus 12 and involved going to the Temple to offer a one-year-old lamb as a burnt sacrifice and a turtledove or a pigeon as a sin sacrifice. If the family was too poor to afford a lamb, they could offer instead a sacrifice of two turtledoves or two pigeons, which is what Luke indicates that Mary and Joseph did.

C. THE PRESENTATION & REDEMPTION OF THE FIRST SON

-- The third ceremony mentioned in the text is the presentation and redemption of the first-born son. This usually took place at the same time as the mother's purification. The roots of this ceremony go back to the Exodus from Egypt, to the night when the death angel killed all the first-born sons of the Egyptians but "passed over" and spared the first-born sons of Jewish families that put the blood of a sacrificial lamb on the doorpost. From that time on all first-born sons in Israel belonged to the Lord. When the son was a month old, he would be taken to the Temple to be presented to the Lord (in recognition of the fact that he belonged to

the Lord), and then the parents would have to redeem that son, buy him back by offering five sanctuary shekels.

The incident that Luke considered to be an important part of the Christmas story but is, unfortunately, usually left out took place when Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple for Mary's purification and for Jesus' presentation and redemption. It's actually a two-fold incident that involves two surprising witnesses who give unexpected testimony to the identity of the baby named Jesus.

II. THE INCIDENT WITH SIMEON (VV. 25-35)

-- As Joseph and Mary bring the baby Jesus into the Temple, through the Court of the Gentiles and up the stairs and through the Gate Beautiful into the Court of Women and up more stairs to the Nicanor Gate, which is as far as Mary can go, a surprising and strange encounter takes place. An old man approaches them. Unable to take his eyes off the baby that Mary is carrying, the man asks to hold the baby. As a new, protective mother, Mary must be uncomfortable and nervous about letting an elderly stranger hold her precious month-old son, but something reassures her that it's all right; so she consents and carefully places her dear son in the old man's waiting arms. The old man cradles the baby close to his chest and tears begin to crawl down his wrinkled but serene face, and then the stranger lifts his voice in a surprising hymn of praise, declaring the baby to be the Messiah.

A. ISRAEL'S HOPE FOR A DELIVERER

-- It had been 400 years since Malachi, the last of the prophets had made the final prophecy and promise about the coming of the Messiah. Throughout that time generations of Jews had prayed thousands of prayers for the Deliverer to come, but all they got instead was invasion and occupation by the Greeks and then by the Romans. For many Jews in first century Israel, hope for the coming of the Messiah was next to dead but not for the stranger in the Temple.

B. SIMEON'S HOPE

-- The stranger in the Temple was named Simeon. Luke tells us that Simeon was "righteous and devout." He was a God-centered man who had an intimate walk with the Lord. Notice the repeated references to the activity of the Holy Spirit in Simeon's life:

v. 25, "the Holy Spirit was on him"

v. 26, the Spirit "revealed to him" that he would see the Messiah

v. 27, he was "moved by the Spirit" to go to the Temple

-- And in verse 25 Luke tells us that Simeon's great desire in life was "waiting for the consolation of Israel," waiting for the one who would fulfill the words of Isaiah 40:1-2

Isaiah 40:1-2 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for

C. SIMEON'S HOPE FULFILLED

1. Imagine Simeon's waiting for this one thing all his life and being assured by the Holy Spirit that he would live to see the fulfillment of this promise, that he would see with his own eyes the long-awaited Messiah. And then the day arrives when that assurance is about to become reality, and the Holy Spirit moves Simeon to go to the Temple, where he will finally see the Messiah. Can you imagine what kind of a person Simeon is expecting to see? A charismatic man with regal bearing perhaps? As Simeon stands in the Temple court surveying the crowds, the Spirit directs his gaze to a poor, ordinary couple with a little baby boy, and then the Spirit speaks to Simeon, saying he is the one for whom you have been waiting." You might expect that Simeon would be severely disappointed or at least confused. Instead, Simeon goes to the couple and asks to hold the baby and then proceeds to make the most extraordinary proclamation about the infant.

vv. 29-32

-- The baby that Simeon is holding is only forty days old and from outward appearances there is nothing unusual or extraordinary about him. He looks like the other infant boys who had been brought to the Temple for presentation. The only thing that distinguishes his parents is that they are obviously poor people. It will be thirty years before Jesus preaches his first sermon or performs his first miracle. Yet Simeon looks at this small infant and then lifts his eyes to heaven and says, "Lord, I am now ready to die, for today you have fulfilled your promise. You have sent the Messiah, and I have seen Him with my own eyes."

2. Amazingly, Simeon declares that this infant is the fulfillment of all the Messianic prophecies and expectations. Look at the remarkable assertions that Simeon makes about the baby Jesus in verse 32.

a. He Is the Light of the World.

-- Simeon declares that Jesus is the light of the world, God's light for all peoples, Gentiles as well as Jews. He is the One God has sent to provide salvation to all, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy.

Isaiah 49:6 It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

b. He Is the Light that Reveals God to Us

-- Simeon says that Jesus is "a light for revelation." The word "revelation" is literally unveiling, taking away a veil that conceals something. That's what Jesus does, unveils God to us.

Hebrews 1:1-3 Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. 2 And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son ... 3 The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God

-- If you want to see God's holiness, watch Jesus as He cleanses the Temple, driving out those who were making the place of worship into a cesspool of corruption.

If you want to see God's compassion, watch Jesus as He responds to the pitiful shouts of the blind beggar Bartimaeus and restores his sight.

If you want to see the forgiveness of God, watch Jesus as He refuses to stone the woman caught in adultery and then says to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

If you want to see the amazing grace and boundless love of God, watch Jesus as He gives His body to be beaten, whipped, and crucified and to die for us.

D. SIMEON'S PROPHECY TO MARY (VV. 33-35)

-- After making his remarkable pronouncement about Jesus, Simeon then turns to Joseph and Mary to bless them and to give a prophetic warning to Mary.

vv. 33-35

-- Babies are cute and cuddly; everyone loves them. But not everyone would feel as warm and fuzzy about Jesus' ministry and mission as the Messiah. In fact, Jesus would become a spiritual lightning rod. Some will accept Him, and some will reject Him, and those responses will carry serious and eternal consequences.

-- Furthermore, Mary would live to see her precious son become the man of sorrows who would die for the sins of the world. Mary would see Him suffer and die on the cross, and seeing that would cause a sword of sorrow and anguish to pierce Mary's heart.

Simeon gives testimony to all of these great truths about Jesus' identity, and who He is and what He will do. But Simeon isn't the only witness that God has brought to the Temple on that day.

vv. 36-38

III. THE INCIDENT WITH ANNA (VV. 36-38)

A. WHO SHE IS

-- Anna is 84 years old. As a young woman, she had done what was typical: she married. But after seven years her husband died, and she became a widow at a young age. But then she did what was far from typical - not so much the fact that she remained a widow (which was unusual but not unheard of) but the fact that she devoted the rest of her life to going to the Temple to fast and pray, apparently as Simeon, for the coming of the Messiah.

B. WHAT SHE DID (V. 38)

-- Luke says that she arrived "at that very moment." At the very time that Simeon was holding the infant Jesus and proclaiming him to be the Messiah, Anna "just happened" to pass by. Of course, this is no coincidence. This entire incident has been carefully choreographed by the Holy Spirit.

-- Anna doesn't pass by. She adds her voice to Simeon's praise chorus. She speaks to all those who were "looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem," that is, to those who were looking for and desiring the coming of the Messiah. To them she speaks "about the child," like Simeon, declaring that the baby named Jesus is the fulfillment of their desires and the end of their search.

CONCLUSION

Simeon and Anna are like the conductor in the holiday movie The Polar Express. The boy who is the main character in the story awakens to a deafening sound outside. He jumps out of bed and runs outside to see

what's happening. At first all he sees is a shroud of steam, which lifts to reveal a magical train that has stopped in front of his house.

Show Scene 2 / Start 0:06:35 / Stop 0:09:37

Like the conductor announcing that the train has arrived and calling for people to get aboard, Simeon and Anna announce that the Messiah has arrived and call for all who will listen to believe and get aboard. What about you?