

Luke 2:21-40
Simeon's Psalm
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The Christmas season is upon us, and for many this is a joyous time of year. For many, it is a time of vacation from work and school and an opportunity for spending time with family. For many, it is a time for giving and receiving gifts. It is in general a season of good cheer. Of course, the traditional focus of this holiday season is the remembrance and celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Yet as far as I can tell, there is no real evidence in the Bible that Jesus was born on December 25. Some argue that Jesus' birth could not have been at this time of year because shepherds were in the fields with their sheep only during the spring and summer months. Others argue that, no, Jesus' birth could have been in the winter because, while shepherds may not have kept their sheep in the isolated fields in the country during winter, yet some shepherds did keep their sheep even in winter in some fields nearer the cities. Bethlehem was near to Jerusalem, and some also argue that these were the shepherds who kept the sheep used at the temple in Jerusalem for the daily morning and evening sacrifice. The truth is that we have no basis in the inspired text for saying anything with certainty about what time of year this was or wasn't. We do not know the month, much less the day, of Jesus' birth. The celebration of His birthday on December 25 is merely an ancient tradition.

Yet even though I don't believe that we really know the day of Jesus' birth, nevertheless I see no harm in focussing on that birth on December 25 as long as we do it voluntarily and not from compulsion or superstition. In fact, I can see good in focussing on the Savior's birth today because His birth is already on our minds. Instead of fighting that, we might as well take full advantage of it. And that is what we will seek to do today.

After all, what is really important is not the month and day but the simple historical fact. The Son of God really did become flesh and dwell among us. The Son of God was actually born of a Virgin. His birth is a true and genuine historical event that occurred in space-time history. The eternal really did invade the temporal; the infinite really did invade the finite ; the heavenly really did invade the earthly; and the divine really did invade the creation in this intimate and personal manner. And that is what we are today voluntarily remembering and celebrating.

Today we are going to remember our Savior's birth by examining some events that occurred soon after His birth as recorded here in the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. We will do so by examining the rituals, the remnant and the recognition.

First we will consider the rituals mentioned in our text. We read in verse 21 that Jesus was circumcised and named Jesus eight days after His birth. This reminds us that Jesus was born under the law in order that He might save His people from the curse of the law. We read in Galatians 4:4-5:

- 4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth
His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,
5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might
receive the adoption as sons.

This text from Galatians says that Jesus was born under the law. The law contains moral principles, and God is neither under or above these principles. God is not above these moral principles as if they were merely arbitrary decisions. Nor is God under these moral principles as if there are principles more ultimate than God Himself.

Rather these principles are rooted in who God is, and God can never violate them without ceasing to be who He is. The moral principles of the law are expressions of God's holiness and God's righteousness and God's justice. Yet God as God is never under these moral principles as a created human being is under them. For example, the law says to honor one's father and mother, but God as God has no father or mother to honor.

The law says not to steal, but God as God already owns everything. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. The law says not to murder, but the life of every creature is moment by moment in the hand of God to do with according to His good pleasure. The law says not to commit adultery, but God is not married and never will be. God as God is the very moral foundation of these moral principles, but God as God was never under them as a finite man is under them. When God the Son was born as a man named Jesus, He became subject to these moral principles in His humanity. Jesus was born under the law as the moral law applies to the human situation. Jesus came to

obey the moral law perfectly, flawlessly, and sinlessly. This is part of the work of salvation. Jesus had to obey the moral law sinlessly so that He could die for His people as a lamb without spot or blemish. Jesus had to obey the moral law sinlessly so that He could cloth His people with His own perfect righteousness.

The law of God also includes what we call ceremonial laws. God as God was never under the ceremonial laws because these laws are all designed for sinners who need salvation. Yet when Jesus was born under the law, that included the ceremonial law as well as the moral law. The laws that we read about in our text for today in Luke are ceremonial laws from the old covenant. We see that Jesus was born under the law in His submitting to these old covenant rituals. We also see that Jesus was born to redeem His people in that He was named Jesus. Before Jesus was even conceived, an angel told Mary to name her son Jesus, and an angel gave the same instruction to Joseph. The name Jesus means salvation.

Our passage in Luke mentions three rituals of the law which Mary and Jesus submitted to. Eight days after His birth, Jesus was circumcised. Then 33 days later, His mother Mary took Jesus to the temple for a double purpose. First, she presented Jesus to the Lord as a first born Son, and then she redeemed Him back by paying five shekels. This was a practice that went all the way back to the redemption of the first born sons in Israel from the angel of death on the night of the first Passover in ancient Egypt. Because God had saved these first born sons from the angel of death through the blood of a passover lamb,

God owned them. Thus the parents had to buy back their first born son from God for a price of five shekels. Secondly, Mary offered a sacrifice as a purification ritual because of her defilement with the blood associated with birth.

All three of these rituals - the circumcision, the purification after childbirth and the redemption of the first born son - all three of these point to the sinful and defiled state of fallen humanity. Because of sin, fallen humanity has been separated from fellowship with God and is worthy of God's judgment. These rituals also point to the need for salvation and cleansing. Our Savior submitted to these rituals even though He was pure and sinless and undefiled. He submitted to these rituals as an infant, just as He would later as an adult submit to John the Baptist's baptism of repentance. He did this not because He needed any cleansing for Himself nor because He had any sin to repent of but because He identified with His sinful people whom He came to save. Through this identification, Jesus took upon Himself the guilt of those He came to save. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Jesus took this obligation of guilt upon Himself, then obeyed those ceremonial laws which symbolized the need to be cleansed of that defilement, and finally through His saving work accomplished the salvation which those old covenant rituals symbolized. Again, His name is Jesus because He will save His people from their sins.

As our Savior, Jesus kept the moral law perfectly, and Jesus provided the salvation through sacrifice that was symbolized by the ceremonial law.

We have looked at the symbolism of these old covenant rituals which our Lord and Savior submitted to shortly after His birth. Let's next look at the righteous remnant which welcomed Jesus at the temple.

We know that the majority of that generation in Israel at the time of Jesus' life rejected Him. Jesus referred to them as an evil and adulterous generation which largely preferred the broad way which leads to destruction. Jesus came to His own, the Israel according to the flesh, and as a rule His own did not receive Him. Yet there were those in Israel who received Him, and to them He gave the right to become children of God. Jesus came as light into the world, and the majority of that generation loved the darkness and would not come to the Messianic Light. But there were those in Israel who lived the truth and loved the light and thus came to Jesus in faith. These were that little flock within Israel who heard Jesus' voice and recognized Him as the Messianic Good Shepherd and followed Him.

Who were this righteous remnant within Israel? They were those whose eyes had already been spiritually enlightened by the work of the Holy Spirit under the old covenant before the coming of Jesus. They had come to faith in the Messiah of old covenant prophecies before they encountered Jesus, the Messiah of new covenant fulfillment. They had rejoiced in the dim light of the old covenant, and they encountered Jesus as those eagerly awaiting the bright light of the Messiah's coming.

Simeon was a part of this righteous remnant within Israel. We read in today's text that Simeon was just and devout. The Holy Spirit was upon Him and gave Him prophetic revelation. He was looking for the consolation of Israel, which is a reference to the comfort Israel would receive through the saving work of the Messiah.

Anna also was a part of this righteous remnant within Israel. She was a prophetess. After she saw the baby Jesus, she spoke of Jesus to all those who were looking for the redemption which the Messiah would bring to Jerusalem as the fulfillment of all that the old covenant rituals symbolized.

We have looked at the symbolic rituals and at the righteous remnant as represented by Simeon and Anna. We will last look at the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. We see this recognition in our passage for today especially in what I have called Simeon's psalm.

Simeon looks upon Jesus and then says that God can now dismiss Him. The Holy Spirit had at some point revealed to Simeon that he would not die until He had lived to see the Lord's Christ. Remember that Christ is the Greek word for Messiah. Simeon knew that he would not depart this life until He had seen the Messiah. Simeon was like a military sentinel ordered to stand watch until some anticipated message had come, a message of good tidings and hope. When that message has come, the sentinel can be doubly glad. He can rejoice because he is now relieved of his responsibility. His watch is

over. His duty is done. He has successfully fulfilled his responsibility. He can also rejoice because of the good news of the message he has received. And so in our text, when Simeon sees Jesus, he takes Jesus in His arms and blesses God.

Simeon is an old man. He views death as a rest for his weary body and a relief from physical pain. He is ready for his rest and reward. He is ready to report to the Divine Commander who had assigned him his special watch, and he anticipates hearing those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Simeon also rejoiced because he has lived to see the rising of the sun of the prophesied Messianic light in Israel. Simeon looked upon Jesus and said that He had seen God's salvation. Jesus was the One through which God would bring salvation to His people. He was uniquely fitted for the task. Jesus was truly human so that He could pay a human penalty for human sin. Jesus also was truly divine. He was the divine person of God the Son living a human life through a complete and genuine human nature. The divinity of His person sustained Him as He accomplished salvation through His suffering upon the cross. And the divinity of His person also gave that suffering infinite worth so that He could be the substitute for a multitude beyond numbering. He was sinless so that He would suffer for others. He was selfless and loving so that He was willing to do so. Only Jesus was able and willing to accomplish the salvation which God had willed for His people.

Simeon next said that Jesus was a light to the Gentiles. The Gentiles did not view themselves as being in darkness. They

thought of themselves as empowered and enlightened. The Romans had their powerful armies, their technologically advanced roads and buildings and aqueducts, and their bureaucracies which were effectively administering an empire. The Greeks had their philosophers and artists and poets. They did not view themselves as in darkness, but God did. Though the Gentiles might have been the most intellectually enlightened people and the most artistic people and the most technically skilled people, they were also enslaved to immoral living. In that sense, they were in a deep darkness. And Jesus was the light which would bring the brightness of salvation beyond Israel to the Gentiles.

And as God uses this Child to bring the light of salvation to the Gentiles, Jesus will prove to be the true glory of Israel. There is a sense in which Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's gift to the world. As Jesus said, Salvation is from the Jews, and this salvation comes through the person of Jesus. Though Jesus was once despised and rejected by His own people, He is the greatest legacy which ancient Israel has given to the world. In fact, no people has ever given a greater, more glorious gift to the world. In fact, all the contributions of all other peoples through the ages are as dust upon the scales compared to Jesus of Nazareth as ancient Israel's contribution to humanity. The coming of Jesus into this world through ancient Israel is the glory of ancient Israel. Let me comment that we should be in prayer that God will lift the veil of unbelief from the eyes of those with the blood of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob within their veins who have not recognized that Jesus is the true glory of Israel.

On this year's Christmas Day, let me encourage you in closing to look upon the baby Jesus with the eyes of Simeon and Anna. Pray that God will remove the veil from your eyes. Pray that God will work with His Spirit in your heart even as He did in that righteous remnant within Israel so that you may receive Jesus and become one of God's children. Pray that this Jesus will become Your salvation and Your light to the glory of ancient Israel, the people through whom Jesus came into this world.