

Christmas 2020

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
(Isaiah 40:1 KJV)*

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.
(Micah 5:2 ESV)*

*“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel,
and for a sign that is opposed”
(Luke 2:34 ESV)*

The Consolation Of Israel

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Luke 2:22-38

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! Merry Christmas to you! If you have your Bible with you, there at home, I'd love for you to open it now to Luke 2:22-38. This is a story about consolation. It's about SEEING the light at the end of the tunnel. It is a story about picking up and holding on to hope. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 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 Lord²³ (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, 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. (Luke 2:22–38 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

The Consolation Of Israel:

Well, I mentioned off the top that this is a story about consolation – that’s a word we don’t use very often but it actually means the same thing as the word we were looking at last week, the word COMFORT. The same Greek word that is used as a VERB in Isaiah 40:1 is used here as a NOUN. Meaning that what God told the prophet to PROMISE back then in Isaiah 40 is what Simeon declares that he has SEEN here in Luke 2.

As we talked about last week the word “comfort” in English doesn’t mean quite what it used to mean. When we talk about “comfort” today we are usually talking about a blanket – a comforter. We’re thinking of something warm and soft and fuzzy – but that isn’t what the word used to mean. It used to mean COM FORTIS – from the Latin which literally means “strength alongside”. Think of it like this: imagine you had fallen down on the side of the road. You were the guy that got beat up in the Good Samaritan story. Somebody had come along and hit you with a tire iron and stolen all your money and left you dazed and bleeding on the side of the road. And then another guy comes along – like the Good Samaritan and he SCOOPS you up and he puts your arm around his shoulder and he begins to bear your weight and to carry you along the road so that you can complete your journey.

That is COMFORT.

That is STRENGTH COMING ALONGSIDE.

Biblical comfort – *parakalesis* – means to restore hope, it means to lift up that which has fallen down, it means to put back on track and to return to promised glory.

It's about turn-around.

To use a sports phrase – Simeon can go to bed happy now because he has stay up long enough to witness the TSN turning point. There is still a lot of game to played, but now that JESUS has taken the field, the finally victory is assured.

That is the consolation of Israel.

It was **PROMISED** in Isaiah 40:1:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² 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. (Isaiah 40:1–2 ESV)

You've reached rock bottom God says. After the Babylonian exile your warfare is ended – your account will be squared and you will be ready to receive the comfort that I will send to you.

So prepare yourself!

Prepare YE the way of the Lord!

Messiah is coming and he will bring you home.

That is consolation PROMISED – and then this story in Luke 2 is about consolation **ASSURED**.

Once Simeon SEES the baby Jesus in Mary's arms, he knows that the COMFORT of God – the consolation of Israel – HAS COME. It is here. He has seen the TSN turning point so he can go to bed in peace. He knows how this game will eventually end. That's what he says in verses 29-32:

“for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”
(Luke 2:29–32 ESV)

I love that!

Mike McKinley says here:

“Don't miss the power of verse 30 where Simeon declares that his eyes have seen God's salvation. God's salvation is not a “what”; it is a “who”. To see Jesus is to see God's salvation.”¹

So if Jesus is here, Simeon says, then everything else God promised to Israel will surely happen because it will all happen IN JESUS. If you have Jesus, you don't have part of the promise, you don't have the down payment – you have THE WHOLE. As the Apostle Paul said:

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. (2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV)

It's all IN JESUS. Jesus DOES IT, Jesus HAS IT, Jesus BRINGS IT – JESUS IS IT – thanks be to God!

So if Jesus is here the consolation of Israel IS ASSURED.

But that's not all Simeon says. Whether intentionally or accidentally prophetically he also seems to indicate that the consolation of Israel will be DEFERRED. Look at what he says to Mary in verses 34-35:

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” (Luke 2:34–35 ESV)

¹ Mike McKinley, *Luke 1-12 For You*, (UK: The Good Book Company, 2016), 27.

Alright, well that sounds like there is going to be a bit of a PROCESS here. Jesus is going to pass through Israel like a dividing rod – he is going to cause some to rise up and others to fall away.

That is UNEXPECTED.

If this was our first time reading the Bible and we just started on page 1 and beginning to work our way right through – through the fall, through the initial promise of a Saviour in Genesis 3:15 and then through the calling of a family and through the establishment of a nation and through the disappointment and decline of that nation and through the exile and through Isaiah’s glorious promise of comfort and through the 700 years of waiting and delay – if we read through all of that and then came finally to this passage I don’t think we would be prepared to hear Simeon say:

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is **opposed**” (Luke 2:34 ESV)

A sign that is opposed?

Who in their right mind would OPPOSE this child?

If you are losing a game 22-0 and then in the 5th inning your manager FINALLY puts in your only GOOD player – who in their right mind would OPPOSE that? Your only question would be – why did you wait so long? Why didn’t you put him in the SECOND inning or the FIRST inning? Why wait until now?

That is the reaction we would expect.

But Simeon says that there will be division over this child and he will be opposed.

So the fact that the child has come means that the promised consolation is ASSURED – but here also we learn that it will be deferred, in some sense.

There will be an extended process. There will be ongoing division. There will be a LAG.

Later in the story we learn that part of the reason for this lag is that the work of Messiah is going to be bigger and broader than merely the rebuilding and reviving of ethnic Israel – Jesus is TOO GLORIOUS A PERSON for so small a task. The prophet Isaiah said that and Simeon appears to have noticed. In Isaiah 49:6 Isaiah records God the Father speaking to the Son – the Suffering Servant who would come. This is inner dialogue in the Trinity!! God says:

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6 ESV)

So, we’re going to EXPAND the PLAN, God says. If I’m going to send my Son then we are going to do this BIG. It will take a little longer, but it will be worth it. We will rebuild not just Israel – we will rebuild THE WORLD.

Simeon mentions that – he says in verses 30-32:

“for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:30–32 ESV)

So we’re doing a BIGGER work than most people were anticipating – and so that implies a certain delay. Jesus talked about this as well. He said:

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14 ESV)

So the consolation of Israel that was PROMISED by the prophet is ASSURED in the coming of Jesus but has been temporarily DEFERRED until the offer of it may be extended to all the nations.

We have to WAIT until this Gospel of the Kingdom has been proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations before the END will come. But it will come. This consolation

will be fully **REALIZED**. To see that, you have to wait until the very end of the Bible. But it does come. In Revelation 21:1-5 it says:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:1–5 ESV)

There it is!!

There is the fully consummated, fully realized CONSOLATION OF ISRAEL. There is ALL of what the prophet promised – and all of it accomplished through the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, intercession and RETURN of Jesus Christ!!!

And it’s not just for Israel – it is for all the nations. We see that too in Revelation 21. In verses 22-27 it says:

“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.²⁴ By its light will **the nations** walk, and **the kings of the earth** will bring their glory into it,²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.²⁶ They will bring into it **the glory and the honor of the nations**.²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” (Revelation 21:22–27 ESV)

That is the COMFORT and the CONSOLATION that we’ve all been waiting for! It was announced by the prophet Isaiah, it was assured by the birth of Jesus, it was deferred so as to include the nations and it will be finally, fully and forever realized by the glorious and climactic return of Christ – thanks be to God!

That's a Christmas theme that I thought might be encouraging to us this morning – and more than encouraging – this Christmas story provides some practical counsel and guidance for people like us – people living in the long delay.

Living In The Long Delay:

Simeon and Anna lived in the time between PROMISE and ASSURANCE – we live in the time between ASSURANCE and REALIZATION – we live in the time of deferment. We live in the long DELAY. So there is a great deal that we can learn from this story because these people were EXPERTS in waiting for Jesus – and it appears that Luke intends for us to learn from their example.

The first lesson in this story, for us I think is this: be righteous and devout while you wait for Jesus.

1. Be righteous and devout while you wait

Listen to how Luke describes Simeon:

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. (Luke 2:25 ESV)

Leon Morris very helpfully defines these terms; he says:

“Righteous shows that he behaved well towards people, while *devout* ... signifies ‘careful about religious duties’”²

That's how GOD'S PEOPLE WAIT.

They don't chew their nails and they don't burn the house down.

²Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 104.

They LOVE other people and they WORSHIP THE LORD.

That's how you wait – and that's how you position yourself for power in the Holy Spirit. James, the brother of the Lord said:

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (James 5:16 ESV)

Do you want to be powerful during this long delay? Then seek that power in righteousness and devotion. Power for God's people isn't found in POLITICS it is found in piety and the presence and blessings of the Holy Spirit.

So be like Simeon - behave well towards others – and be careful in your religious duties.

And expect division.

2. Expect division

Simeon said:

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed” (Luke 2:34 ESV)

Jesus understood that his ministry was a ministry of division. He said:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:34–37 ESV)

Jesus said that his coming would divide families. Not because he wanted it to but because it was inevitable. Who you BELIEVE that Jesus IS GOD – that he is THE DIVINE SHEPHERD – that becomes the defining decision of your life. Because if he is GOD – if he is CHRIST – if he is the

hope and salvation of the world – then of course you should lay down your life, of course you should obey his every command, of course you should follow him to the ends of the earth. He’s the Good Shepherd! He’s the God man! He’s CHRIST!

But on the other hand, if you decide that Jesus was just a prophet, an interesting teacher from a bygone age – one voice among many – then you will hear him, take what you want, leave the rest and move on.

And of course – as you can well imagine - those two decisions cannot go together. If some people in a house believe that Jesus is GOD IN THE FLESH and some people believe he is one voice among many – then that house will be divided. And a house divided will not stand.

Jesus understood that he was going to burn the house down. He used that kind of language – he said:

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!” (Luke 12:49 ESV)

There is DESTRUCTION before CONSTRUCTION. Before the TENT of Israel is rebuilt and expanded – many other tents, many other houses must be torn down.

So expect division.

Expect it in the culture, expect it in the world – and expect it in your home.

And do not for a second assume that because you follow Jesus – because you love Jesus you will be spared pain and sorrow and tribulation in this life. Nobody loved Jesus more than Mary and yet Simeon told her straight up:

“a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Luke 2:35 ESV)

Even Mary – the mother of Jesus – was told to anticipate pain.

3. Anticipate pain

Jesus was brutally honest about this with his disciples. He said:

“In the world you will have tribulation.” (John 16:33 ESV)

The word translated there as “tribulation” means:

“afflicted(-tion), anguish, burdened, persecution, tribulation, trouble.”³

So how you get Health and Wealth Gospel out of that, I will never understand. In this world you will have tribulation. You will have affliction. You will experience anguish. You will carry heavy burdens. You will experience tribulation. You will have to deal with various troubles.

Jesus said that.

He was a pretty reliable prophet.

So if he said it – you should expect it. You shouldn’t be THROWN by it.

You should assume that such things will be characteristic of LIFE FOR BELIEVERS during the long delay.

But do not let those troubles rob you of Gospel hope. That’s the fourth and final lesson in this story.

4. Keep hope alive

Look at the example of Anna the prophetess. Luke says:

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

³*Strong's Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “paragraph 1.

depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. (Luke 2:36–37 ESV)

So she was married for 7 years and then her husband died – and we presume that they never had children because she spent the rest of her life – until she was 87 – living in the temple, worshipping, fasting and praying day and night – watching for the coming Messiah. And when she saw him:

“she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:38 ESV)

That’s a long time – that’s a lot of waiting, but CLEARLY, Anna never gave up hope. She knew he would come:

“for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:5 ESV)

God said he would come – so Anna knew that he would come.

And he did come. Jesus came! And Jesus said that he would come again. In John 14:1-3 Jesus said:

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, **I will come again** and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (John 14:1–3 ESV)

That where I am – you may be also.

That is the consolation of Israel.

Literally!

That is the climactic HOPE of the Old Testament prophets. It is the LAST WORD in the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel – did you know that? Ezekiel had a vision of the rebuilt Kingdom of God. He

saw a river flowing out from the temple and turning the sea into fresh water and causing the desert to burst forth into bloom. Many of the images he spoke of were picked up and reapplied by John in the Book of Revelation in chapters 21 and 22 – our New Testament vision of the new heavens and the new earth. He talked about the River of Life – and he talked about the tree of life – do you remember that? He said:

And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.” (Ezekiel 47:12 ESV)

The land will be restored – and the people will be restored! All of that is incredible – all of that is great – but do you remember the climax? Do you remember the last words in that prophecy? The closing words of the Book of Ezekiel?

Let me read them to you:

“The LORD Is There.” (Ezekiel 48:35 ESV)

That’s the last word.

Old Testament and New – that is the FINAL and FOREVER consolation of Israel.

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:3–4 ESV)

The Lord is THERE!!!

He will dwell with us! And we will dwell with him! He will make all things new! He will wipe away every tear. Death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain forevermore – for the former things have passed away.

That's it!

That's what Anna and Simeon were waiting for and that is what they knew was COMING in the birth of Christ the Lord.

The Lord is HERE – and the LORD is coming – thanks be to God!

Let me pray for us.