

Anna's First Christmas

By Doug Agnew

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Bible Text: Luke 2:36-38

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Grace Church (PCA)

2007 Stallings Road
Harrisburg, NC 28075

Website: www.graceharrisburg.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/gracepc

If you have your Bibles with you tonight, I ask you to turn with me, if you would, to the second chapter of Luke again and we are going to be looking tonight at verses 36 through 38.

And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.¹

Bow with me as we go to the Lord in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you and praise you tonight for this great season, the time that we as God's people will gather together to worship Jesus and praise God for sending Christ to this earth. Heavenly Father, as we look tonight at Anna we pray that you would give us insight into her character, that you would help us, Lord, to understand what motivated this lady, what drove her to holiness. Heavenly Father, we pray for holiness for ourselves and ask, Father, that you help us that each day that we might become more Christ like and that the character of Christ might be lived out in your people especially here at Grace Church that when people would see us they would know that we have been in the presence of Christ Jesus. Guide and direct us, Father, through the passage tonight. We give you praise, honor and glory for what you do for us for it is in Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen.

You may be seated.

If I were to ask you tonight to give me a list of the characters of Christmas, what would you say? Of course we would say Jesus, the baby. We would say Mary and Joseph and we would probably say the wise men and the shepherds and probably mention Gabriel the angel and even the multitude of the heavenly host. We would probably even mention King Herod. But one that would be commonly overlooked is this lady whose name is

¹ Luke 2:36-38.

Anna. She just doesn't stick out much. In fact, if you go to the Scripture to study Anna you will only find three verses that tell us anything about her. She was not a superstar by any means and she was a woman who we might consider one of the little people of Christmas.

But, you know, that is significant in itself, isn't it? Because Christmas has always been about the little people. If you look at the people who were great in the eyes of society and in Jesus' day, they just missed Christmas all together. Think of Caesar Augustus. He did not know that the Son of God had been born in a manger, neither did the Roman Senate, neither did the Greek philosophers, neither did Caiaphas or the Sanhedrin. They were totally oblivious to the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had been born.

I think maybe this is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote down his words in 1 Corinthians chapter one verses 26 and 27 and he said this:

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.²

So tonight we are going to take a look at a little lady who understood the significance of that first Christmas. I think she had greater insight than all the political dignitaries or the religious hot shots or even the military superstars, just a little woman.

Anna was a widow lady and she was old. From what we know from the Scriptures here it seems that she could have been 105 years old. Now that is determined by what text you read this Scripture from. There is some ambiguity there. But it seems like she could have been 105 years old. Undoubtedly this lady understood the significance of the first coming of Jesus probably even as great as any of the characters in the Christmas story except maybe Simeon. I think Simeon had great revelation, but she was pretty close to him.

Now just who was this lady? Her name was Anna. The word "Anna" in the Hebrew means grace. So that was a lady from the very birth was named grace. Her father was a man whose name was Phanuel. The transliteration of that in the Greek is Penuel or Peniel. If you go back to Genesis chapter 32 you get some insight into what that name means. You remember Jacob was wrestling with the angel of the Lord. It was really the Lord himself. And the Scripture says they were there at the River Jabbok and when the wrestling match was over with Jacob named that place Peniel which means, "I have seen God face to face."

All the way through the Scriptures you will see that word pene- used over and over again and that word means face to face. It speaks of deep intimacy.

Folks, God wants us to have deep intimacy with him. You will see that in many different places in the Scripture. When a man was entering into a covenant with his son, that

² 1 Corinthians 1:26-27.

covenant would be called a pene covenant, a face to face covenant. When a man married his wife and took his bride into the bridal chamber the relationship that they would consummate was called a pene relationship, a face to face relationship.

Moses in Exodus chapter 33 verse 11 the Scripture says this.

“So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”³

God’s desire for us is to have a pene relationship with him, a face to face relationship, a relationship of deep intimacy. And, to me, this is where it gets interesting. For just think about this way. If you had borrowed money from a brother in Christ and you had told this brother in Christ, “I am going to pay you back this money on a certain day,” and something goes wrong. You don’t have the money. You are not able to pay him and you don’t get in contact with him and you just kind of let it slide, well, some days go by. He doesn’t say anything to you. He doesn’t contact you. And then you are over at the mall one day and you are walking through the mall and all of the sudden you see that brother in Christ and he is coming your way.

And what do you want to do? Do you want to run over to him, throw your arm around his shoulder and ask him he is doing and talk to him? No. Let me tell you what you want to do. You want to kind of hide your face and you want to walk away from him, hoping that he doesn’t see you.

Now why would you feel that way? You would feel that way because of shame and that shame that you weren’t able to pay him back and you didn’t even contact him would bother you so bad that you would desperately run away from a face to face encounter with him.

People, I want you to know. That is why God hates sin, because it messes up our intimacy with God. But when you have got unconfessed sin in your life, what does that do to you? Does it make you want to run to God? No. It makes you want to hide from God. When you have got unconfessed sin in your life you don’t want God looking at you. You don’t want a face to face encounter.

So when God commands us to repent, what is he commanding us to do? You know, to repent means that you are going in one direction and if you need to repent, you are going in the direction opposite from God. And repentance is a 180 degree turn. And so you make a 180 degree turn away from running from God so that you are running to God so that you might have a face to face encounter with him.

2 Chronicles chapter seven verse 14, a great verse that we use for revival. God says, “I My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”⁴

³ Exodus 33:11.

⁴ 2 Chronicles 7:14.

Well, what is that telling us? It is telling us that God wants us to have a face to face relationship with him, a deep relationship of intimacy. That is what God desires for his people. That is why he wants us to run from sin, to repent of it, so that that relationship can be restored.

Peniel means intimacy with God. And Anna's daddy's name was Phanuel which is a transliterated word in the Greek, Peniel, which means face to face relationship.

Now what this tells us is that Anna was a covenant child. And by saying that I am not trying to imply that if a child has a mother or dad that is a Christian that they are automatically become Christians. That would violate John chapter one verse 13 where John says that we are born, that is born again, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."⁵

So it is not to say that you are automatically a Christian because your mom or dad is a Christian. But we do need to conclude that if your mom and dad are godly Christians, then they very well may be the instrument in God's hands that he uses to draw you to Christ.

I have no doubt that that was true in Anna's life. Her dad must have been a godly man. He named her grace. He looked at his daughter not as a burden. He looked at his burden not as a problem. He looked at his daughter as a grace gift from God. He looked at his daughter as one who was given to him and was undeserved favor with God.

We also find out that she came from the tribe of Asher. The word "asher" means happy. Asher was one of the sons of Leah who was one of the wives of Jacob. And she had this baby and she was so happy in the birth that she named him Asher.

The tribe of Asher was always known for their celebration of the Lord. And as I look at Anna that is what Anna reminds me of, positive holiness. She is one who celebrates the Lord with all of her heart.

If Anna had been living in our day and time she would not have described her Christianity by what she didn't do. She would describe her Christianity by what Christ did on her behalf. She was not one of those who say, "Well, I am a Christian and I don't smoke, drink, cuss or chew." She would say, "I am a Christian. And this is what Jesus did for me. He died for me. He rose for me. He filled my heart with his Spirit and I have the privilege and the pleasure of serving him."

She is also called a prophetess. Now there is a big difference between a prophetess in the Old Testament and a New Testament office of pastor. She is not a pastor. She is a prophetess. And she was a lady who would get revelation from God just like John the Baptist got revelation from God. She would take that revelation and she would proclaim that to God's people. She was not a pastor. She was a prophetess.

⁵ John 1:13.

We also find out that she was married and only seven years after her marriage her husband died and left her as a widow. She was probably married at a very early age, probably around 13 or 14 years old and she was only married for seven years. Her husband died and then she stayed single for the rest of her life. She, according to some texts, you read the ESV text or the New American Standard text and it would indicate that she was probably 84 years old at the time of where we are right now with Simeon. If you read it in some of the other translations it appears that she may have been 84 years living after she was married which would put her at close to 105 years old. So we are just not sure about it, but whatever. She was an old, old woman.

A couple of things I wanted to point out to you. In the middle of verse 37 the Scripture says that she departed not from the temple, but she served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

Now I have to be careful here not to be legalistic because there is a big difference between the local New Testament church and the central Old Testament temple. The local New Testament church is about worship, learning and equipping the saints. That is why we are here. That is what we do. The Old Testament temple there was worship that went on there, certainly, but primarily it was the place of sacrifice. So we need to note that the function of the Old Testament temple and the function of the New Testament church are somewhat different.

But I think the idea here is pretty much the same. Here was a lady. When God described her, he described one of her attributes that he was pleased with. One of those attributes was that she was a faithful, she was very faithful in her church attendance.

Now she was there every opportunity she could she was there at the temple. She was there to worship the Lord. She was there to fellowship with God's people. She was there to learn. She was there to pray. She was there.

Now you may bring up the question: Well, what does that mean? Does that mean that if a person is there at every church service that he is a better Christian than those that are not? I am not saying that and I know that sometimes a person that is there at every church service might get very proud of that and think that he is better than others because of that and that would be wrong.

I heard someone say one time that people who come to church on Sunday morning love the church. People that come on Sunday night love the preacher. People that come on Wednesday night love the Lord.

Well, if that is the way you think, then that is probably sinful pride and that would be wrong. That is not the way that Anna was thinking. I don't think Anna even thought about this. I don't think just, you know, going to church was an obligation to her. It was... that was not in her mind whatsoever. She was a lady who loved the sabbath day because she could spend the whole day in worship of her Lord. She loved to come and

pray. She loved to come and worship. She loved to spend time around God's people and around the things of the Lord. It was not obligation. She couldn't wait to get the ironing and the cooking done so that she could get over and spend time in the Lord's presence.

And I will be honest with you. I love being in church. I mean, it is exciting to me. I love to be with God's people. I love to sing God's praises or at least try to. I love preaching. I love worshipping. I love learning. I just enjoy church. It is not an obligation, something that I have to do. It is something that I have the privilege of doing. And I think that is the way it was with Anna.

But look at verse 38 with me and I want to show you why I say this lady understood the significance of that first Christmas.

It says, "And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem."⁶

She walked into the temple and there stood a man she was very familiar with. This man's name was Simeon. Simeon and Anna were buddies, both very old, both had been in fellowship with each other for a number of years. I am sure they talked about the good old days, but most of all they talked about the Messiah. For as we saw this morning, Simeon had received a revelation from God that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ. So Anna and Simeon were good friends.

One day Anna walks into the temple. She sees Simeon talking to a young man and his wife and Simeon is holding something in his arms and tears are flowing down his cheeks. She looks a little closer and she realizes that that thing that he is holding in his arms is not a thing at all, but that thing is a baby. And she runs over to Simeon and she says, "Is that who I think that is?"

And Simeon says, "Yes, ma'am. This is the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And the Scripture says that at that instant she gave thanks.

I think she forgot about how old she was. I think she forgot about the arthritis that stoved up her joints and I believe that she ran over to Simeon. She fell at his feet. And she worshiped Jesus and gave thanks for him.

Soon her praise turned into prophesying and I want you to look at the subject that she prophesied on. She prophesied on the subject of redemption. And, folks, here was a lady who was a prophetess. She was a lady who was at the temple day and night. They couldn't keep her away from it. She was a lady who received revelation from God. She was a lady who was very disciplined in her spiritual life. She was a lady who was named grace. She was a lady who had her dad who called her a gift from God. She was a lady who fasted and prayed continually.

⁶ Luke 2:38.

But she had a problem and the problem was that she was a sinner. She had a heart that was corrupt. She had a conscience that was guilty. So she knew that this baby in the arms of the old man Simeon was not just a political king. He was not just a political Messiah, but he was, in fact, her Redeemer. That is what mattered to her.

The baby had been born so that she could be free. Free from what? Free from sin's dominion, free from the power of sin, free to love God and be able to worship God with everything that was in her. She could have prophesied on any one of 1000 attributes of the Messiah. She chose to prophesy on the redemption.

Why? Because it was the subject of redemption that was burning in her heart.

The word "redemption" is a beautiful word in biblical theology. It is a word that means buying a slave off the slave block, but this word means even more than that for it means not just to buy a slave off the slave block, but to buy a slave off the slave block in order that that slave might be set free. This particular illustration is a good one because in the Roman Empire in that particular day 60 percent of the people who walked around in the Roman Empire who lived in that empire were slaves. That means three out of every five people that you would see on the street were slaves. So this illustration would go well with them. They would understand what it would mean to buy a slave off the slave block.

One of my favorite stories of redemption is found in the Old Testament. I love this story. It is the story of Hosea and Gomer and it is the greatest Old Testament story of redemption. What happened?

Hosea was a prophet of God. He was a great prophet of God. He was a man who loved God and he preached hard. He preached on sin and he preached on the righteousness of God. He preached on the shortcomings and the failures of God's people. He was a good man. He was a holy man. But I don't think he was a very compassionate man. I think he had a tendency not to just hate the sin, but also to hate the sinner.

And, you know, God has a way of breaking the pride of his people. And I believe that God broke Hosea and that God helped Hosea be a man not only of conviction, but a man also of compassion. God told Hosea to go and marry a harlot.

Now I don't think... I think that God was speaking prophetically there. I don't think that when Hosea married Gomer that she was a harlot at that time. I think that she became a harlot. He married her, loved her dearly, just thought the sun rose and set in her. He loved this lady. They had three children and he loved his children dearly.

Everything seemed to be going fine until he came home one day and when he walked in his wife was gone. The children were crying. And he said to the kids, "Where is momma? What is the matter?"

They said, “Dad, mom left today. A man came by and she walked away with a man. She packed up her stuff and she said she won’t be back. She is tired of this boring life that she lived.”

Hosea’s heart was absolutely broken. He just couldn’t hardly stand it and he fell on his face before God and he prayed, “Oh, God, do whatever you have to do to bring her back. Break her heart. Just help those that are after her to lose interest. Put a hedge of thorns around her. Break her. Do whatever you have to do, but bring her back to me.”

But Gomer went absolutely wild. She went not only to that lover, but from one other lover to another to another to another. Finally she became a temple prostitute in the temple of Baal. And after a period of time she became so dirty, so diseased and so sick that the priests of Baal kicked her out of the temple. She couldn’t stay there any longer as a prostitute.

And from that she went and she sold herself to a slave owner and the slave owner was able to feed her and give her food, but he was going to sell her at the auction. He took her into Samaria, the place where Hosea lived and put her up on the auction block to sell her as a slave. And it just so happened that Hosea was coming by that day. And Hosea walked by the slave, the auction that was going on and he saw his wife up on the slave block. He looked up there. It was hard to recognize her. She was sick, diseased and dirty. She looked about 15 years older than she did just a couple of months ago when she was there as his wife.

And he looks up at his wife and his heart begins to break again. He takes 30 pieces of silver. He goes over to the slave owner and he throws the silver down at his feet and he walks over to his wife. She looks down at him and she can’t believe what she is seeing.

And he says, “Honey, come on. I have bought you back.”

She can’t believe it. She falls down into his arms. She puts her head down into his shoulders. She weeps like a baby. He wraps her up in a blanket. He takes her back to his home. He nurses her back to health and takes her back as his wife.

The most beautiful picture in the Old Testament of redemption. There is only one picture in the Bible that is more beautiful concerning redemption than that and that is the Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross to pay for our sin debt, to redeem us forever.

Folks, that is what Anna saw in the baby Jesus. She looked at him. She said, “This is not just a little king, but this is my Redeemer.”

Now that is biblical redemption.

You know, one of the doctrines that we talk about a lot here in our church is the doctrine of irresistible grace. There are a lot of people who misunderstand that doctrine. They think that irresistible grace means that God is going to save some people, he is going to

drag them into heaven kicking and screaming, people that don't really want to come. I want you to know that is not what irresistible grace is. Irresistible grace means that God makes us willing in the day of his power, that God changes our will so that we have a great want to, so that we have a great desire and a great hunger for God, so that God who we mistrusted now we know that he is the only one that we can really trust. This God that we hated now becomes the all consuming desire of our heart.

Irresistible grace doesn't mean that you have to come to Christ. Irresistible grace means that you want to come to Christ.

Paul said it best in Galatians four and verses three through six. He said:

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.⁷

F F Bruce wrote a book several years ago called *Paul the Apostle, a Heart Set Free*. And in this book he was kind of sharing the paradox of what Paul understood and what Anna understood about redemption, that Jesus has redeemed us not with silver or gold or corruptible things such as that, but he has redeemed us with his own precious blood. He has redeemed us in order that he might set us free.

But notice that our redemption, once it has been paid, that it has an effect on the regenerated heart. And once that heart has been regenerated then it is very interesting what we want to do with our redemption. We have got a new freedom now. We are free. What do we do with it?

If your heart is truly regenerated, you want to take that freedom and lay it at the feet of Jesus so that you can say along with Paul, "I am a δούλος (doo'-los) of Christ. I am a slave to Jesus."

And then when you do that, do you know what you realize? You come to realize that my goodness, now I know what true freedom is. I have freedom from guilt. I have freedom from a soul of conscience. I have freedom from sin's dominion. I have freedom to love God and worship God like I never have before.

I want to stop right here and say something, I think, that is important about Anna. Anna was a single lady. She was a single lady for a long, long time, many years. And I believe it is important for us as a church to know that there is nothing wrong with godly singleness. If you are a single that does not mean that you are somehow incomplete. And I think so many times people that are single in the church feel that they are incomplete.

⁷ Galatians 4:3.

People, I want you to know Jesus was single and he was lacking absolutely nothing. If God has called you to be single, then be single to his glory and it is ok.

Joseph Tan when he was here with us last year I just had the chance to talk with him and just to get into his heart a little bit and talk to him about some experiences that he had. And he shared something with me that just kind of blew my mind. He said that he has met people all over the world. He went to Oxford. He lived in Romania as a pastor and has been here in the States for a long time and he said, "Doug," he said, "I have met a lady that as far as I am concerned is the most sold out lady to Christ that," he said, "I have ever met." And it was Nancy Lee DeMoss. You may have heard her on the radio before. And after he told me that I saw a book that she wrote and I thought, man, after he said that about her, I want to read what she has got to say. And I bought the book and it was a book called *Surrender*. And I am in the process of reading it now.

But she is talking about her calling, what God had called her to. She has never been married. She is a single lady and I wanted to read to you what she said about her calling. She said, "I have come to believe that there is no greater calling than to be marked as his slave, to choose to give my life in the service of the master. I have grown to know and love and trust. For many years my prayer has been, 'Oh God, make me a woman with a hole in my ear.'"

So when the person decided that he wanted to be slave forever to a person they would take an awl and drill through his ear. And when people would see that hole they would know that this person is not free. This person is a slave. That is what she is talking about there.

She said, "I want to be identified as a slave of Jesus Christ. That is not to say that living as a bonds lave of Jesus Christ has always been easy. Among other things, for me, that choice has meant spending the majority of my adult life on the road, living out of suitcases in temporary accommodation, seldom being able to put down roots, difficulty maintaining deep, long term relationships, relinquishing any right to a private life, virtually always being on display and on call to minister to the needs of others, living with relentless deadlines, little free time for entertainment, recreation or personal pleasures, working when others are relaxing or socializing, few days or nights off, forgoing the privilege of marriage and child bearing, carrying an ever pressing burden for the condition of the church and the spiritual needs of others. Do I sound as if I am complaining? I confess that I have done more than my share of whining about the pressures and demands of serving Christ, but the foundational relation that both motivates and drives my choices is the same perspective that motivated that bond servant in Exodus 21. I love my master. I truly cannot imagine a more wonderful, gracious, kind and loving Lord than he."

Anna prophesied redemption for her Christmas was not the cradle. For her Christmas was the cross. And of all the people associated with the Christmas story, except Simeon, I believe that she had, perhaps, the deepest and greatest insight.

Folks, she knows that there is power in the blood. She is not proclaiming potential redemption. She is proclaiming positive redemption. She is saying, “Jesus Christ will save his people from their sins. He shall, shall, shall save his people from their sins.”

It is not that he might save some people. It is that he shall save his people. I kind of wonder if she didn't point at Jesus at this point at time where Simeon is holding the little baby in his arms and maybe quoted Isaiah 53 verses 10 through 11.

Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.⁸

Do you see why Anna was excited? Her redemption had come. It wasn't just a possibility. It was reality. And nobody could stop it. Herod couldn't stop it. Pilate couldn't stop it. Caiaphas couldn't stop it. The Sanhedrin couldn't stop it. Satan himself could not stop it. Anna didn't just see a baby in the arms of Simeon. Anna saw the cross of Calvary.

And I might be wrong, but instead of Anna singing at that first Christmas the great old Christmas hymn or carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, I have a feeling that she probably sang another hymn, *Redeemed*.

Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it.
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.
Redeemed by his infinite mercy.
His child forever I am.
Redeemed, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

I want to ask you to stand and Eugene is going to come right now and lead us in that very song, *Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it*.

⁸ Isaiah 53:10-11.