

Luke

A Soul-Piercing Enterprise
Luke 2:31-35

With Study Questions

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For context we will begin with verse 29.

(Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; ³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation) Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, ³² A light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel.” ³³ And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this *Child* is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against ³⁵ (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:31-35).

Review

We now have the final prayer/poem/canticle/song (whatever you want to call it) surrounding the births of Jesus and John the Baptist. It is given by Simeon whom the Holy Spirit **“was upon.”** We previously addressed how his prophetic words revolved around the promise that he would not **“see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.”** This was not some morbid desire to die, but the joy of seeing God fulfill His promise to redeem the world and vindicate His own name.

To see God at work in this manner provided Simeon with a depth of satisfaction that he could now die in peace. Not only is he **“taken away from [the] calamity” of this world (Isaiah 57:1)**, but he can rejoice in knowing that the fountain of living waters would soon begin its **“trickling” (Ezekiel 47:2)**. A trickling that would, in time, become **“a river that could not be passed” (Ezekiel 47:5)**.

This great redemption, which Simeon saw when he lifted the Savior of the world in his arms, is summed up in the simple words uttered by Simeon in what he saw. His eyes, seeing the baby Jesus, had seen God’s **“salvation” (Luke 2:30)**. In the remainder of the prayer, he elaborates on this salvation.

Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples (Luke 2:30).

All Peoples

Being born and raised in a nation such as ours, we tend to live under the assumption that we have a perfect right to anything anyone else has a perfect right to. The '*All men are created equal*' clause in the Declaration of Independence has, rightfully so, successfully injected such a thinking into the corporate conscience.

Since such thinking flows so easily through our bloodstreams, we fail to appreciate a verse like the one before us. Stratifications have run through virtually all religions and political and economic systems in the course of human history. This includes the Christian faith as well. The administration of Christianity prior to the birth of Christ (keep in mind, the Gospel was first proclaimed directly after the fall of man-Genesis 3:15), was almost uniquely Jewish (other than those who proselyted into Israel) and not merely supervised, but participated in by healthy, Jewish men.

Circumcision (obviously only applied to men) would be an example. Eunuchs were excluded from entering "**the assembly of the Lord**" (Deuteronomy 23:1). Think also, lepers (Leviticus 13) and so forth. It is of note that as the New Covenant blossoms, Jesus touches a leper (Luke 5:12-14), a eunuch is baptized (Acts 8:38), a woman is baptized (Acts 16:15) and whole gentile families are baptized (Acts 10:47; 16:15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16).

We tend to think of these as mere random accounts of events, but they would have been (and were) shocking to the religious community at the time. The faithful within the religious community "**the sons of Israel**" (Romans 9:27-Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh-9:3) had been reduced to a remnant and needed to realize that the only reason they weren't judged like the other nations was because it was through them that Christ would come, the "**seed**" preserved (Romans 9:29). It might be said that they were the biological father of the Christian faith.

Simeon is not coming up with some new thought here. It was always God's plan to, as it were, save the world. All the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3).

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:10).

By the phrase, “**before the face of all peoples**” *kata prosopon panton*, Simeon means everybody. Not being raised in the church, I recall being uncomfortable in the environment, as if I didn’t fit in. But the Christian faith is for all people without distinction. Anyone, at any station in life who, by the grace of God, is seeking Christ. At the time of Simeon, the truly faithful amounted to a small (what Rome considered) sect of Judaism that, so they thought, would likely lose momentum. They were significantly wrong.

Two thousand years ago, the world encountered a magnificent interruption. The biggest interruption the creation has ever known was the incarnation – the eternal Son of God becoming flesh – the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. In 1926 a pastor, Dr. James Allen Francis, wrote a sermon from which later a poem was extracted – a poem about Jesus which became very popular, entitled *One Solitary Life*. It reads:

**He was born in an obscure village
The child of a peasant woman
He grew up in another obscure village
Where he worked in a carpenter shop
Until he was thirty when public opinion turned against him**

**He never wrote a book
He never held an office
He never went to college
He never visited a big city
He never travelled more than two hundred miles
From the place where he was born
He did none of the things
Usually associated with greatness
He had no credentials but himself**

He was only thirty three

**His friends ran away
One of them denied him
He was turned over to his enemies
And went through the mockery of a trial
He was nailed to a cross between two thieves
While dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing
The only property he had on earth**

**When he was dead
He was laid in a borrowed grave
Through the pity of a friend**

**Nineteen centuries have come and gone
And today Jesus is the central figure of the human race
And the leader of mankind's progress
All the armies that have ever marched
All the navies that have ever sailed
All the parliaments that have ever sat
All the kings that ever reigned put together
Have not affected the life of mankind on earth
As powerfully as that one solitary life**

That solitary life has now touched not hundreds, or thousands, or millions but billions (2.2 according to Pew). How correct Simeon was. He continues.

A light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel (Luke 2:32).

A Light

Again, Simeon highlights the international nature of the Gospel.

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles –¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned (Matthew 4:15, 16).

The glory of the **“people of Israel”** was that the light of Christ would proceed from it.

Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons, ¹¹ for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High. ¹² So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor; they fell down, with none to help. ¹³ Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. ¹⁴ He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart (Psalm 107:10-14).

It feels sometimes as if we are living in a world barraged with nonsense. It can be frustrating to observe the ethical, political, philosophical, cultural and economic folly by which we are surrounded (and, at times, penetrating the church itself). But we must understand that all these calculations are established by those who sit in darkness. A **“revelation”** is needed. An unveiling.

Now that Christ has ascended, from whence does this light, this unveiling, come? It is summed up by Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

Christians are the only people in a dark room with a flashlight. We should put it on. How does this take place? This happens when we do well (**“good works”**) and seek to honor God (**“give glory to your Father who is in heaven”**). Of course, not everyone likes a well-lit room.

And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother,

“Behold, this *Child* is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (Luke 2:33, 34).

Marveling

Most of Israel at this time did not marvel. But Joseph and Mary did. What is wrong with us that we don't marvel? When my children are on stage or on the court or field, you may wish to avoid speaking with me. I am preoccupied. I am in the act of marveling. Not (necessarily) because my children are so talented, but because they are mine. I love them. I'm invested in them.

We fall short of marveling because our hands are not in the mixture. We have not prayed. We have not shared. We have not served. We have barely obeyed. Yet somehow, we think such a tepid faith should produce a marveling. Don't expect to marvel if you don't think things are marvelous enough to gain your devotion.

Fall and Rising

Mary had earlier pondered (Luke 2:19). If you recall, to ponder meant to put all these things together in her mind. To use a somewhat cold term, to systematize these events. Simeon will now add something to this systematizing of events. Jesus is **“destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel.”**

Jesus, being the Truth (John 14:6) will have the effect that truth has. Truth, by the very nature of the case, is divisive. The very thing that truth does it set itself in opposition to falsehood. The religious community, during the time of Christ, was not just a bit off. They didn't need a little tweak in their theological or moral wheel. No, their father was the devil, **“the father of lies” (John 8:44)**. The Pharisees didn't particular care to hear this from Jesus. They probably thought their god was just fine.

The world loves an ambiguous god. Like the golden calve, we want a god who is powerful but not overly identifiable in terms of his claim in our lives. We want a god who will do our bidding, but not one who has called us to do his. This is the world Jesus was born into. In many ways, we currently see, even the Christian religion, descending into this cultural construction.

Based upon moral and theological opinions dominating western evangelicalism, it is not difficult to conclude that the Scriptures are no longer the predominant guide. The church is content to sit in a lukewarm jacuzzi.

But when the true Christ, the biblical Christ, is introduced into the affairs of men, there is nothing tepid about it. He is either believed or denied. He is loved or hated. He will either be, as Peter wrote, a “**chosen and precious**” cornerstone, or a “**A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense**” (1 Peter 2:8). In presenting these widely varied responses to Jesus, Peter completes his thought with the words, “**as they were destined to do**” as if to assure his readers that none of this is catching God (nor should it catch us) off guard.

Jesus was clear that peace on earth would come at the expense of addressing the false peace (perhaps the *pax romana*) in current existence.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34).

In this respect, Jesus, like a sword, is the great divider! Simeon points out that the Lord would give them a “**sign.**” All of Israel should have known what this sign was and what it meant (Matthew 16:1-4).

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

Immanuel means “**God with us**” (Matthew 1:23). The eternal Son of God entered human history and would disrupt the religion of man. The temple, which they all could probably see, had been the heart of true religion but would become an emblem of apostasy which, Jesus taught, would be razed to ruins. Churches take care, for we are taught the same could happen to us if we follow their course of unbelief (Romans 11:21).

In a similar manner that Peter warned his readers that God had ordained opposition, Simeon warns Mary of the difficulties ahead.

(yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:35).

A Pierced Soul

Often, the Christian faith is presented as a philosophy to help us through life. Jesus is the ultimate motivational speaker and following Him means thinking positively, being grateful, achieving our goals, forgetting our past, tapping into energy, having high standards, being a visionary, etc. Properly understood, these might be good things.

But the heart of the Christian faith, above all these things, is that Jesus was incarnated (became flesh) that He might die for the sins of the world. And when this truth is presented, it blows away the fog of lesser things. The problem is the fog does not want to leave. It does not wish to acknowledge its own vaporous condition. We are offended by the proposition that we **“are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes (James 4:14).**

Jesus, just as the truth of His word, was a two-edged sword, judging the **“thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).** The sword of His mouth, His truth, would result in a spear in His side. It would be a painful road to glory. It would pierce His mother’s soul to see what her Son had to endure in order to be her Savior. She was, after all, His mom. It is of value to know that the road before you may have thorns, traps and robbers.

At times in troubled marriages, I’ll hear a spouse say, “I didn’t sign up for this.” Barring some exceptions, when you vowed ‘for better or worse’ that is exactly what you signed up for. Why else would that be included?

Doing the right thing, being a child of God, seeking to be a faithful servant may be a soul-piercing enterprise. You wonder if Simeon was seeking to produce in Mary what God had produced in him. Was he aiding her to embrace a deep peace even in the prospect of death itself?

Did he want her, even in the face of the pain she would encounter, to have a comfort, not that things always go well according to our own calculations, but that there is a God who governs the affairs of men with wisdom, power and grace, that she with Job might say, **“though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him” (Job 13:15).**

Questions for Study

1. Who is the Christian faith for? Explain (pages 3-5)?
2. What does Simeon mean by a “light to bring revelation to the gentiles?” How can you participate in that (pages 5, 6)?
3. Do you find yourself marveling at the things of God? Why or why not (page 7)?
4. How is Jesus “destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel?” Explain how this type of thing takes place (pages 7, 8)?
5. Why do you suppose Simeon warned Mary about her soul being pierced? Can you give examples how this type of thing has happened to you? How are we called to respond (pages 8, 9)?

