

Luke

Then There's Anna

Luke 2:36-38

With Study Questions

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Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ³⁷ and this woman *was* a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served *God* with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸ And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38).

Introduction

I've never quite understood pastors, in relatively good health, who choose to retire. I was in my fifties (in the ministry for over twenty years at the time) before I felt like I had an inkling of what I was doing. Many times, I have sat with pastors, who were my elders, and encouraged them to stay the course. I tell them Ben Franklin was almost 80 when he invented bifocals and over 80 at the Constitutional Convention. They're quitting in their prime.

R. C. Sproul was almost 80 when the Lord took him home and, as far as I can tell, continued ministering to us all though requiring oxygen tubes while on stage. Pastor John MacArthur is still managing to upset people (I mean that as a compliment) from his pulpit at 84. Does the Bible address this at all? Yes.

What of Joshua and Caleb? A member in our church, seeking and succeeding to encourage me, mentioned what we read in Joshua,

Now Joshua was old, advanced in years. And the Lord said to him: "You are old, advanced in years, and there remains very much land yet to be possessed (Joshua 13:1).

If you continue to draw breath, there is **"land yet to be possessed."** By **"land"** we speak of the Great Commission and by **"possessed,"** I speak of the spiritual warfare necessary for the victory.

As I've grown older, I've come to more appreciate the spirit of Caleb (one of the two spies, along with Joshua, with the courage to enter Canaan). Many years later, anticipating yet another battle, we read:

And now, behold, the Lord has kept me alive, just as he said, these forty-five years since the time that the Lord spoke this word to Moses, while Israel walked in the wilderness. And now, behold, I am this day eighty-five years old. ¹¹ I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war and for going and coming (Joshua 14:10, 11).

There is nothing like the fight! I don't say this to encourage undue pugnacity, but to enliven the Caleb in us all.

Luke now introduces us to an obscure, elderly woman. But a fighter, nonetheless.

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity (Luke 2:36).

The Prophetess

Everything we know about Anna is contained in these three verses. We know her name, "**Anna**," which means grace. We learn that she was a "**prophetess**." After hundreds of years of silence (Malachi being the last time God had spoken), the famine was coming to an end.

"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord God, "That I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine of bread, Nor a thirst for water, But of hearing the words of the Lord (Amos 8:11).

Anna is among a small sorority of women bearing this title. Miriam, the sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20); Deborah, the judge (Judges 4:4); Huldah, the wife of Shallum; Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3); and Philip's four unmarried daughters (Acts 21:9). All to say, even in the Scriptures, it is

rare, and we should be on guard against those who claim such an office for themselves as if it is normal and extant. But Anna was a prophetess. This meant she was gifted by God to speak His word, without error.

Plan Interrupted

Luke also speaks of her lineage. Her father was Phanuel, which means face of God, and she was of the tribe of Asher, a daughter of Israel. He then gives her age and a bit of her history. She had been married seven years before becoming a widow. Luke does not inform us why he mentions this somewhat brief marriage. But it is safe to conclude, that the untimely death of her husband did not embitter her against her God.

As a young woman, she no doubt, had a plan. But as so often the case in life, God has a different one. Something can be said for planning. There is some truth in the adage that if you fail to plan, you're planning to fail. At the same time, we must be careful not to allow our own plans to become idolatrous. Early in my ministry I was routinely asked what my vision was for our church. To be frank, I just didn't have one. Preach the word, administer the sacraments, love God's people and see what God will do was my only strategy.

Allowing your vision to take control is summarily, and I believe accurately, contradicted by the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he wrote,

God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren.

Or more simply put,

**A man's heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps
(Proverbs 16:9).**

...and this woman *was* a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served *God* with fastings and prayers night and day (Luke 2:37).

Widows

Anna had long been a widow. It is unclear if she had been a widow for 84 years (making her over 100) or was 84 years at the time of this event. Luke mentions widows far more than all the other gospel writers (Luke 4:25, 26; 7:12; 18:3, 5; 20:47; 21:2, 3). The vulnerability of widows was a great concern to Luke (really to God), as well as other writers. Widows are to be honored and cared for, first by their own families (1 Timothy 5:3, 4) and then, if need be, by the church.

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

And a godly widow is not sidelined. She may remarry (1 Timothy 5:14) or she may dedicate herself to other critical roles.

Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day (1 Timothy 5:5).

The latter appeared to be the choice of Anna. One of these options should not be viewed as more or less valuable than the other. Raising a family or full dedication to the ministry are both noble. Yet at some level, the latter would need to be included in both. Motherhood and ministry both involve prayer.

A Lifelong Pursuit

And as difficult as it is to reduce this woman's entire life to three verses, let us understand this, her behavior in her old age did not begin in her old age. It began as a young woman. To be sure, God will often bring in His eleventh-hour workers. The thief on the cross is no second-hand citizen

in heaven. But it is of special note, honor and cheer to be numbered among those who serve God all their days.

For the young people who may have checked out when we spoke of the aged Sproul, MacArthur, Ben Franklin, Joshua and Caleb, all of these began their journey of faithfulness while still young. Joshua and Caleb were fighters from their youth. Ben Franklin may have been almost 80 when he invented bifocals, but he was only 11 when he invented swim fins.

There may be certain behaviors that have a brief shelf-life. You don't see too many 50-year-old gymnasts or figure-skaters. But there are other behaviors we can continue to cultivate our entire lives. I am guessing Anna's life of "**fastings and prayers**" did not diminish in her old age.

Not Departing From the Temple

Luke records that in her fastings and prayers, she was not serving herself, or even others, but serving God. No doubt, there were many beneficiaries of her fastings (a fast is usually done at critical times-something through which we can still serve God) and prayers. But in serving God's people, we are primarily serving God Himself.

And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me' (Matthew 25:40).

When Luke writes that she "**did not depart from the temple**" we might conclude she had an apartment in the temple or that she was so regularly at the temple, that the language of hyperbolic. That verse 38 indicates her "**coming in**" at least hints she might have been somewhere else. The simple point is she was considered almost a fixture in the temple.

It is highly unlikely that she was alive when the temple was destroyed some seventy years later. But I wonder how that would have made her feel. Truly, this woman at some level is to be imitated. How do we imitate a saint who does not depart from the temple when we have no temple? Ah, but we do.

Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ Then the Jews said, "It has

taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But He was speaking of the temple of His body (John 2:19-21).

In a primary sense, the body of Christ (the true temple) is found and permanently established in His resurrection. Also, when His church meets, His word proclaimed, His praises sung and His victory declared, He considers it His body.

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence (Colossians 1:18).

I can only guess that had Anna seen the temple destroyed, though perhaps touched with a bit of nagging nostalgia would feel the way a mother or wife might feel when, after only having a photo of a deployed son or husband, sees him walk through the door. The real thing has arrived!

And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem (Luke 2:38).

Thankfulness And a Speaking Mouth

Anna had not grown "**weary while doing good**" (Galatians 6:9). Her father's name, Phanuel, meant the face of God. Now she would look upon the face of the baby Jesus. In many ways, He was just a baby. It wasn't as if He came with a tag or some physical feature designating who He was. But being a prophetess, Anna knew full well who this baby was. She could not help but burst forth in gratitude, giving "**thanks to the Lord.**"

There is a popular, yet inaccurate, adage which posits, '*Share the Gospel, if necessary, use words.*' Though I appreciate the sentiment (be a loving person), do we really think that our behavior can be so stellar, that another person could merely look at us and conclude that Jesus died and rose again? No, Gospel means good news. News must be spoken. There is information to convey.

The welled-up gratitude in Anna could not be contained. Luke would later record the words of Jesus, **“For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45)**. Anna provides a great example. She would speak of Christ **“to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.”**

We are not sure what this amounted to. Maybe many people, maybe a few. But Anna was a fountain. You wonder how many people over the course of her many years serving in the temple came to her for prayer and fasting and whatever prophetic utterances she might have had. She wasn't a pastor. She wasn't an elder. But that didn't mean she didn't have more to offer than the men in robes by which she was surrounded.

And all of this can be true of any woman, any person, today. It may not always seem like it, but God has prepared hearts out there, those who are looking for redemption. To be ransomed, as it were. To be purchased in such a way as to belong to their rightful owner. It's as if God has given them a great discomfort in their current condition.

And if you're a praying person like Anna, a person who night and day, finds refuge in the true temple, who is Christ, God can and will enlist you to be a fighter in His battle; a singer of His songs; a proclaimer of His redemption. And regardless of your birth certificate, that never gets old.

Questions for Study

1. Does the Bible say anything about staying in the battle regardless of age? What battle (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some of the things we learn about Anna in these three verses (pages 3, 4)?
3. Have you ever had serious plans interrupted? What are the various ways you've responded? How can we prepare ourselves for a proper response (page 4)?
4. Why do you suppose Luke mentions Anna being a widow (page 5)?
5. In what ways is it possible for us to imitate Anna (page 5-7)?
6. How can you know if God has prepared another person's heart for redemption (page 8)?