

# Longings Fulfilled

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, again, I say to all of you who are here, Merry Christmas. Happy New Year. This is the last day that we can officially say Merry Christmas, the 12th day of Christmas.

It's the eve of the epiphany, which technically happens tomorrow. And I don't know about you, but this time of year is always hard for me, emotionally speaking.

There's a sense of letdown, a sense of a kind of mild to moderate depression that always sets in. Even if you have a great Christmas, I mean, even if the celebration is wonderful and you see lots of friends and family, even if it is ideal in many ways, there's always afterwards a kind of feeling of emptiness, at least in my experience.

A sense of something lacking, an incompleteness. And as with anything in the spiritual life, that kind of thing is worth paying attention to.

And so what I want to do this morning is to pay attention to that feeling, to inquire where it may be coming from. Because as we look at Luke chapter 2, we're going to realize that that sense of longing can actually lead us somewhere.

[ 1 : 21 ] That there's tremendous value if we follow it. And so we're going to look at Luke chapter 2, the part of the Christmas story that sometimes gets overlooked. And we're going to see a few things about this longing.

We're going to see three sort of questions answered. Number one, what are we longing for really? Where's the emptiness coming from? Number two, why can't we get it?

Why can't we get that thing that we're longing for? And then number three, how does Christmas make it possible? So what are we longing for? Why can't we get it? And how does Christmas make it possible?

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you for the Christmas season. And we thank you for all of the hope and the joy. But we also thank you for the sadness and the loneliness and the longing.

Because these are things that motivate us. They drive us to look beyond what's right in front of us. They call us out of ourselves. They turn our faces to the stars.

[ 2 : 25 ] They make us wonder if there's more out there than what we can see or touch or taste. We pray that you would call us out of ourselves and into yourself as we open your word, Lord.

That you came to dwell in our midst. That we might live for eternity in your midst. And so we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So this first question, what are we longing for?

Luke chapter 2, verse 22 to verse 40. This is a passage that's all about longing. We meet two very important people in the Christmas story, Simeon and Anna.

And they're both advanced in years. They're both fairly old. Which is important because we realize right away that they've both spent their entire lives waiting.

They've spent decades waiting. Simeon, at some point in his life, we don't know when, but God came to Simeon in the Holy Spirit. And told Simeon that he would not see death until he had seen God's Savior with his own eyes.

[ 3 : 32 ] So he's been made this promise, but we get the sense from the way he talks about it that it's been a trial for him in some ways. It's been a long season of endurance.

He's been told, you're not going to see death until you see the Messiah. And so he rarely leaves the temple. He's there every day waiting, hoping today might be the day that he sees the Savior.

And then we have Anna. And Anna is given the very distinguished title of prophetess. And she's 84 years old, which is older by today's standards, certainly old by the standards of the first century.

And Luke tells us that Anna was only married for seven years before her husband died, from the time that she was a virgin. So assuming that she perhaps got married around age 13, which

wouldn't have been uncommon, she was married up until age 20, and then she lost her husband. And since age 20, or thereabouts, she's been single. She didn't remarry. She would have probably been encouraged to remarry, but she remained single for decades, for the next 64 years.

[ 4 : 44 ] And she has devoted herself to what we might consider to be an intercessory prayer ministry. It says she never leaves the temple.

It's possible that she had even been given an apartment there, which sometimes happens. So she was living there, and she fasted and prayed every day and every night.

So both Simeon and Anna have lived lives that are filled with spiritual longing. They say they're waiting for the consolation of Israel.

They're waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. And God had actually told Simeon, you will not have peace until you see my salvation. So it's not been a peaceful time.

It's been full of unrest, full of unanswered prayer, full of questions, full of longing. And in a way, this is a story about Simeon and Anna, but in a way, it's a picture of the human condition as a whole.

[ 5 : 44 ] It's a picture of something that I think on some level we all experience. We all have a kind of spiritual longing that can't ever fully be satisfied. This is what C.S. Lewis famously described as that inconsolable longing.

He describes it as a longing for the scent of a flower we have not found, or the echo of a tune that we have not heard, or news from a country that we've never yet visited.

Inconsolable longing. And yet, I think if you were to go out and you were to ask people, or maybe some of you here are thinking, you know, I'm not really aware of that in me. I've never really felt that longing that sometimes I hear Christians talking about.

And there's a number of reasons why you can live much of your life and never really tune into that longing, never really be aware that there's something like that inside you. You know, I think some people tend to bury that longing, along with many other parts of themselves, under a kind of avalanche of distractions.

Right? I mean, you can work enough or look at your phone enough or eat enough or drink enough or shop enough that you're continually distracted, and you never have to pay attention to anything that's going on in here.

[ 7 : 00 ] Least of all, some kind of deep spiritual longing. So some people bury it. I think some people channel that spiritual longing in other directions.

They channel the longing into good things that they allow to become ultimate things or God things. So just to take one example, centuries ago, centuries ago, people cared about things like social justice because they cared about and loved God.

The idea is I love God. God cares about justice. Therefore, I care about justice. But what's happened over the last few centuries is that more and more people have desired a vision of life that excludes God or anything transcendent, a purely materialistic worldview.

And so philosophers like Charles Taylor say that we take that spiritual longing that used to be channeled toward God and we redirect it. In a materialist worldview, where we don't allow for the transcendent, we have to do something with that longing for the transcendent.

And so he says we channel it into things like the pursuit of justice. And so we have gone from being a society where people pursue justice for God's sake to being a society where justice has become God.

[ 8 : 29 ] The pursuit of justice has become divine itself. And what I mean by that is it has become the source of meaning and the source of fulfillment and the source of identity for many, many people.

And so now in our society, everybody cares about justice. And many people pursue justice with a kind of religious fanaticism because it's become a source of meaning and purpose and identity.

And yet at the same time, there's tremendous confusion over justice because it's no longer embedded in a larger narrative. It's no longer rooted in any truth outside itself.

And so no one seems to be able to agree on what justice even is. But we all want it to satisfy the longing. And then I think that there are some people who don't feel that sense of spiritual longing because they mistake that longing for other kinds of longing, lesser longings.

Right? There's a kind of nostalgia obsession in our culture where people love the nostalgic. There are shows like Stranger Things that are, it's a great show, but it is custom tailored to evoke that sense of longing for people who grew up in the 80s and 90s.

[ 9 : 45 ] And it's there for a reason because if you can evoke that sense of nostalgic longing, you can make money because we love feeling that.

Right? And there's a sense in which we idealize the past and we say, if only I could just get back to the good old days. If only I could just sort of relive that. Right? You feel that if you travel and you go home for Christmas and you say, man, I hope that this Christmas is like all those Christmases that we used to have when everything was great and fun and peaceful.

And then you get there and you're sort of tragically disappointed. It doesn't even come close. Right? And the kind of hard news is if you were to get a time machine and to go back to those idealized earlier Christmases, I can almost guarantee you they would fall short also.

Because what nostalgia is, is it's a longing for the past that in some ways we imbue with the inconsolable longing. We say, this is what I'm really longing for.

If I could just get back there or recreate it somehow. So some people live in the past for that reason. Some people say, if only I could find my true soulmate.

[ 10 : 56 ] Some people say, if only I could get to some place of financial security and stability. Right? So we mistake the inconsolable longing for other forms of longing.

And this drives many people to just move from place to place. Or to go from job to job. Or to bounce from church to church. You know, over the years I've met so many people who they came to our church from another fantastic gospel-centered church.

And they come to our church and they mistake that sense of novelty for spiritual growth. And then once the novelty wears off and once they're showing up to volunteer for the 400th time and they kind of, you know, they've been through some drama and some decisions have been made they don't like, the novelty's gone, they kind of hit a wall.

And instead of pushing through the wall, which is really a wonderful part of spiritual growth, is learning how to deal with those walls that we encounter, they bounce to another church.

And then again, they seek out that sense of novelty that they mistake for spiritual growth. Right? So there are all of these ways that we try to deal with the longing. And then we have Simeon and Anna here who know the truth about the longing.

[ 12 : 12 ] They know who we are all really waiting for. And that's the value of this passage. Right? So now this seems like a good time for me to pivot and to say, okay, well now let me tell you all about Jesus and how he satisfies all of your longings.

And that's true. Jesus is the object of our longing. He can satisfy all of our longings. But there's a problem that we have to deal with first. Leads us to the next question.

Why can't we get the satisfaction that we crave? When we come to Christ. Look what Simeon says in verse 30. He says, My eyes have seen your salvation as he holds the baby.

Right? That you have prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. First, the good news. By definition, the gospel is meant not just for Israel or for Westerners or for religious people.

The gospel is by design meant for the world. And this is a theme that we hear in this service because it's what we focus on during Epiphany, which is tomorrow. We talk about the fact that the gospel is meant for all of the nations.

[ 13 : 25 ] This is God's free gift of salvation and it's meant for every single man, woman, and child. Right? It's meant to go out to the world. And yet, Simeon goes on to say, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and the rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed.

Now, here's the question. If God is offering salvation freely to the whole world, why in the world would anybody oppose it? That does not sound controversial.

Well, the conflict comes when you realize that Jesus alone is God's salvation and that there is no other way. When Simeon sees Jesus, he doesn't say, Finally, here's somebody who's going to be able to teach us how to get saved.

He says, Here is salvation. In other words, Jesus himself is God's salvation for the world. And once he gets older, Jesus himself says, Not, I will teach you the way, the truth, and the life, but he says, I am the way and the truth and the life.

And then Jesus says, Whoever believes in me is not condemned, but whoever does not believe in me stands condemned already. And this reveals something very fascinating and very crucial to understanding the gospel.

[ 14 : 51 ] We will rise and fall depending not on who we are or what we have done for God or what we have not done.

We will rise and fall depending entirely on our relationship with Jesus. Those people who give themselves fully to Jesus and follow him will rise to glory.

Those people who reject Jesus will fall under condemnation. Jesus himself says this. So, in a way, Jesus came to unify and bring peace, but he's also polarizing.

And, if you read the Christmas story, you realize that Jesus is polarizing before he's even born. Before he's even born, he's polarizing people.

You look at Mary. Mary responds to the news of Jesus by completely surrendering herself to the Lord. She says, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

[ 15 : 53 ] Let it be to me according to your word. Let me tell you this. There is no greater example of discipleship in all of Scripture than Mary's response to the angel upon learning of the birth of Jesus.

Let it be to me according to your word. That's discipleship. Herod responds in the opposite way. When Herod hears the news of Jesus, he sees Jesus as a rival, as a threat to his power, as a contender for the throne.

And the truth is, if you look at Mary and you look at Herod, and then you look at your own heart, you realize that I think if you're anything like me, inside you see parts of yourself that look like Mary and parts of yourself that sound an awful lot like Herod.

I think that we fall somewhere between these two extremes. You know, I may say I want to follow Jesus and I really mean it up to a point. I really want to follow Jesus because I want the peace that Jesus offers.

I want the answer to my longing. I want to be whole as a human being. But, if I'm really honest, and I'll be honest with you, just keep it here, there are parts of my life I'm willing to do that with, but there are parts of my life that I hold back.

[ 17 : 15 ] And I keep a pretty tight grip on them. You know, I want the peace that Jesus offers, but I'm also kind of a control freak when it comes to my life. And I love being in control of my life.

So, I will trust and follow Jesus when it comes to liberating the oppressed. I love that idea, but not when it comes to my love life. I will trust and follow Jesus when it comes to my job.

I want to seek his will for my vocation, but not when it comes to how I spend my money. I want the peace, but I want control. I want to have my cake and eat it too.

And I think our experience of the Christian life is part surrender and part power struggle. And I think both are happening at the same time in us. And I think that this is one of the main reasons why many of us who seek to follow Jesus, who have given our lives to Jesus, nevertheless do not experience the kind of peace that we read about.

We struggle with that sense of longing and unrest. because I think that there are parts of us that want Jesus to be our salvation and part of us that oppose him as a rival king.

[ 18 : 26 ] And so if you take a moment to kind of look inward and to figure out where those places are in your life of fear or anxiety, of resentment, of bitterness, of unresolved anger, if you find those places in your life, I can almost guarantee you that those are connected to, that they're emanating from something in your life that you are holding on to with a white knuckle grip.

Wherever those feelings are, as we said at the beginning of the sermon, don't run from them, listen to them, follow the thread, figure out where they're coming from, you're probably going to find a power struggle in your heart.

And this is why we need Christmas. This is why Christmas is such good news. How does Christmas make it possible to overcome the power struggle? Well, Simeon goes on to tell Mary, because of Christmas and the birth of Jesus, he says in verse 35, a sword will pierce through your own soul so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

And just imagine this scene, Simeon holding this baby, looking from the sweet child to the faces of Mary and Joseph, two new parents who have been through what must have been an enormous trial, spiritually, emotionally, physically, to get to the temple after this conflict-filled birth narrative. And their faces are exhausted, you know, they've not gotten much sleep, they may even look a little haggard, and yet they're beaming, right?

[ 20 : 22 ] They're radiating happiness and joy at this new child in their life, right? This is the fulfillment, this is God's answer, this is what they've been waiting for. And yet Simeon, as he looks

from the parents to the child, God allows this prophet to see the beautiful, awful truth of Christmas. How does Jesus, how does Jesus save people who are spiritually longing for him and yet perceive him as a rival king?

Who want what he offers and yet would just as easily kill him to stay in power? How do you save somebody like that?

How does Jesus overcome the power struggle and bring peace to people who don't necessarily want it on his terms? And you can imagine Simeon putting the pieces together and recognizing this, that Mary's great burden was not giving birth to a baby in a cattle stall.

Her great burden was watching that baby die on a cross. And for a mother, I don't have to tell you, that would be like having your soul run through.

[ 21 : 42 ] But in a way, this is something that I think that we're all meant to experience. You know, becoming a Christian isn't really about taking a blind leap of faith.

faith. It's not really about an intellectual assent where you sort of look at the evidence and say, I believe these things happened. A lot of people believe these things happened who are not Christians.

Becoming a Christian is about having your soul pierced by the cross. It's about having your soul pierced by the cross. The Bible scholar and historian N.T. Wright tells the story of a Roman Catholic archbishop.

He says, the archbishop was once preaching a sermon and in the sermon he tells this story of three boys. They were younger boys and they were walking along down the street and they thought it would be a really funny kind of prank to go into a Catholic church that they saw and to go one by one into the confessional booth and then to confess all kinds of wild, bizarre, outlandish, crazy things just to see what the priest would do.

And this sounds exactly like something boys would do. Young boys would do, right? At least me and my boys. And so they go in and they make these confessions and they think, they imagine that they're kind of blowing this priest's mind, right?

[ 23 : 05 ] But the priest is experienced and he knows exactly what's happening. And so the first two boys get away but he kind of catches hold of the third. And he says, okay, you've confessed all of these sins, now I'm going to give you a penance.

He says, I want you to go down to the front of the church and I want you to look at the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross. And I want you to look at the face of Jesus on the cross and I want you to say to Jesus, you did all of this for me and I don't care.

And he says, I want you to say that three times. So the boy goes down to the front of the church, looks at the picture, says, you did all this for me and I don't care. And then he says again, you did all this for me and I don't care.

And he can't say it a third time because right about then he breaks down and he starts to cry. And Wright says that the archbishop then says, the reason that I know this story and I know those boys is because I was that boy.

I was that boy and that was the day that I came to know the Lord. Becoming a Christian isn't about becoming intellectually convinced of something. It's about having your heart pierced. There's a moment when the cross ceases to be theoretical.

[ 24 : 16 ] It ceases to be a bit of doctrine in a confession. And there's a moment at which the cross leaps off the page so to speak and it becomes deeply and uncomfortably personal because the more you look at the cross, the more you look at Jesus on the cross, the more you begin to become aware that you're not the basically good, compassionate, enlightened person that you think that you are.

You start to see your own selfishness. You start to see your own pettiness. You start to kind of see your overblown sense of self-importance.

You start to realize that all the insecurity you feel about what are people going to think is immaterial because guess what? Nobody's thinking about you. They're thinking about themselves.

Nobody really cares about you. Enough to notice your shoes. Right? Nobody cares. And you begin to realize the truth about things. And yet this isn't a bad thing.

This is something that many people would say, oh, now you're struggling with low self-esteem and we need to fix that. This isn't a bad thing. This is a wonderful thing. It's a beautiful thing because the more you begin to see the truth about yourself, the more you begin to see the truth about Jesus and

you begin to see the truth of the love that Jesus has for you.

[ 25 : 34 ] So becoming a Christian isn't about the plausibility of the cross. it's about believing the necessity of the cross. It's about looking at the cross and saying, nothing less than this was necessary to save a person like me.

Nothing less than the death of the eternal Son of God was necessary to save a person like me.

When you begin to realize that, it pierces your heart.

It pierces your heart. It opens up a wound. that is then filled with the Spirit of God. So just a couple of implications to bring all of this together.

First, I would say that knowing the true object of all human longing puts all other longings into perspective. So think about Anna.

You know, most likely lost her husband at age 20. barely getting going in life. We don't know if she had any kids. Spends 64 years unmarried at the temple.

[ 26 : 50 ] Right? Justifiably, she could have turned out to be a very different person. She very justifiably could have become an incredibly bitter and angry and resentful person. Like, why is this my lot in life?

Why can't I have that? Why can't I have that? Why can't I be like that family? Why is this my lot in life? That could have been her. And yet, we don't know much about her, but the one thing that we do know is that she became a person of immense joy and gratitude and devotion.

You know, whatever unfulfilled longings we're facing, the best way to avoid falling into bitterness and self-pity and despair is to recognize that the one true object of our heart's desire, the one who can actually make us whole, is Jesus Christ, and he has come and he is available.

And if you have him, you don't believe me now, but one day we will in the New Jerusalem. You won't believe this, but if you have him, you have everything. And one day, you're going to believe it. One day, I'm going to believe it. I think I'm maybe about 30% there. Right? Most of the time, I don't believe that, but I think maybe at my best, 30% of me believes that.

[ 28 : 11 ] But one day, we're all going to believe it because we're going to experience it. If you have him, you have everything. And the other thing I'll say is this. If you're a Christian, and yet there are parts of your life that you know you're holding back, white knuckle grip, power struggle, more like Herod than Mary, not willing to give them over to Jesus, or if you're not a Christian, and all of your life is a power struggle with God, I encourage you to simply spend some time looking at the cross.

You don't have to say the phrase three times. You can if you want. But really look at the cross.

Really think about the cross. And it may be that God uses the cross to pierce your heart.

A God who is willing to take on flesh and give his life for you is the kind of God that you can give your whole life to. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for the cross. We thank you for the beautiful, ugly, horrible, offensive, wonderful truth of Christmas and its connection to the cross.

And we thank you that our relationship with you doesn't hinge on us getting it right, having our ducks in a row, pulling ourselves together, proving our devotion to you.

[ 29 : 34 ] It's not about us making a difference in the world or showing you how much we care. it's simply about us recognizing that we need the cross. That you knew what we needed and you gave it to us before we even asked.

As your word says, while we were still sinners, you died for us. While we were still in rebellion, you gave yourself for us. I pray that as we come to your table in a little while, our hearts would be pierced anew.

that those would become holy wounds of glory into which the light of your gospel is poured into our hearts.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. ■ lindle to a