

The Desire of Nations

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[0 : 00] We are continuing over the next few weeks to look at part of Jesus's life that isn't much recorded.

It's his childhood. From the time he was born until he started his ministry when he was in his early 30s.

We don't have much. We have this remarkable, remarkable story. I'm going to start, though, in 1945.

The Scottish author Bruce Marshall wrote a novel called *The World, The Flesh, and Father Smith*. Father Smith is a Catholic priest.

At one point in the book, Father Smith is walking to an appointment and crosses paths with a woman, a young woman, named Miss Dana Agdala. She's beautiful, intelligent, professional, a very successful author.

[1 : 06] And they strike up a conversation. She says, tell me, Father, do you get much response to the old, old story these days? And she reveals that she had long rejected all of that poppycock about baptism and purity and the virgin birth.

Because, of course, she says, it's against all modern science and obstetrics. But she's eager to talk to Father Smith because she rarely comes into contact with his type.

And has all kinds of questions she wants to ask. So he invites her to walk with him and to ask away. And eventually, she asks him about his own sexuality, this Catholic priest.

And how he manages to, she says, live without us. Unfazed, Father Smith responds, I don't think this is mansplaining. It might be.

You know, it's 1945, so who knows. Anyways. So Father Smith responds, women's bodies are rarely perfect. They soon grow old and sag. And always the contemplation of them, even at their best, even at their best, is a poor and boring substitute for walking with God in his house as a friend.

[2 : 23] Aha, Miss Aguila thinks. Father Smith's answer proves what she had always thought about Christians. That religion is only a substitute for sex.

And she says that. Father Smith turns her assertion upside down. He says, I still prefer to believe that sex is a substitute for religion.

And that the young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God. The young man that rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.

In today's passage from Luke, we meet another old religious man. And he understands his deep longing for God. And that longing is fulfilled beyond his wildest dreams in the form of a baby.

In that moment, he responds with a declaration that will captivate readers of the Bible for the next 2,000 years. It will be set countless times to music. And it will be used as a prayer by Christians all over the world.

[3 : 30] It has a Latin name. *The Nunc Dimittis*. Now, Lord, let your servant depart in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation. Simeon's longing was fulfilled in Jesus.

Is Jesus your chief desire? Is he mine? Now, technically, as we've discussed, the answer is yes.

But we turn to all kinds of other things to fulfill those longings and desires.

Instead of going to God himself, I turn to all kinds of other things. And then to Jesus. But fortunately, I think this passage is more than just a description of what happened on a given day 2,000 years ago.

It also tells us how we, too, can find Jesus as our ultimate desire. Jesus becomes our ultimate desire when we realize that he completes our stories.

He does that by entering into relationship with us. And by representing us.

[4 : 43] So we're going to talk about stories. Relationship. And representation. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to your word needing your help.

We don't have eyes which on their own can see the truth and beauty right in front of us. And we don't have hearts which on their own are willing to submit to truth and beauty.

These next moments together, we ask you, Father, to be our vision. Holy Spirit, come light our hearts. Jesus, be our desire.

We ask this in the name of our high king, Jesus. Amen. So do you have anything like this?

This is my favorite candle holder. It has been broken so many times. My wife and I picked this up in Doolin, Ireland.

[5 : 47] It was just kind of sitting on the wall as we drove by. And you could just put money in a box and take it. So we did. And in the, I don't know, 17, 18 years we've been married.

She's not here. I can just guess. I think it's 18. In the 18 years or so, we've been married. This thing has been broken like so many times.

And you can see like all the cracks and crevices. And now there's even holes that you can peer through. But even so, I think this is the most beautiful thing in my house.

And I think we all know instinctively that the most beautiful things come from the most broken things. We realize this is what we want to be.

We can relate to the shards, the fragments. We live in a culture that can be well described as fragmented.

[6 : 49] And because of the fragmentation in our culture, our stories tend to be fractured into pieces that don't quite fit together seamlessly like we would like.

Take geography, for instance. Who in this room grew up inside the Beltway? Raise your hand. Really? Not one.

Wow. Yeah. Yes. Yes. Grats. Come on. No, I'm kidding. Yes. Yeah. Okay, so one of us. Yeah.

Where we live now is disconnected from where we grew up and where our families are from. And where we work is often different from where we live. And there's all kinds of other examples of fragmentation that we suffer in our culture.

Many of us grew up with divorced parents and broken families. We moved around a lot as children.

And we still don't know what to tell people when they ask us, where are you from?

[7 : 51] Our work friends are separate from our church friends, are separate from our neighbors, not to mention all the other friends we have ever had. And we know also, instinctively, that nobody really has a thousand friends, right?

We consume all kinds of products, but we're disconnected from the people that have made them and where those products come from. We have online presentations of ourselves that are often vastly different from who we are in real life.

And our individualistic culture adamantly and fanatically tells us to write our own stories. And in doing so, we divorce ourselves from a common story.

So you feel it, right? Now, for different reasons, Simeon has experienced a kind of fragmentation.

His nation, Israel, has been ruled by one foreign kingdom after another.

Israel used to hear regularly from God through the prophets. But he's been silent for a long time.

For over 400 years. Silent. Silent. And when he used to speak, he had promised deliverance from oppression.

[9 : 07] But that is yet to come. And he had promised a rescuer. And he has yet to appear. It's a story that was incomplete. And probably didn't make sense a lot of the time.

One group of elites tried to make sense of it by saying, if we follow God's law closely enough, and if we follow all these other rules that we've made up, rules upon rules, then God will come and rescue us.

But that just set up another form of oppression. And so suffering had become a way of life for Simeon and for the Israelites. And they were waiting for its consolation. As it says in verse 25, Simeon was waiting for Israel's deliverance.

But at some point in Simeon's life, the Holy Spirit speaks to him. Before Simeon dies, he will meet the rescuer. God's servant will liberate his people.

The comforter that will bring this consolation. Now, Simeon lived in Jerusalem, and he would have spent a lot of time at the temple. Jewish families were required to bring their firstborn sons to the temple to have them dedicated, as we heard in the passage.

[10 : 21] And so week after week, month after month, year after year, Simeon would see baby after baby pass through the temple until one day, a baby is brought by a young carpenter from Galilee and his young wife.

And God says to Simeon, that's the one. That's the one. That's who you've been waiting for. All the broken fragments of Simeon's story, all the broken fragments of Israel's history were gathered up in this little baby.

In this baby, Simeon's story makes sense to him so much that he scoops the child into his arms and declares out loud in the temple, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word.

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. Could it be possible with you? Could he bind together all the broken fragments of your story? Now our fragmentation is not just a cultural one. It is also deeply personal and spiritual.

[11 : 40] Could he gather up those fragments? Could he take the bad decisions you've made? Or the betrayal you've experienced? Or the abuse?

Or the abandonment? Could he gather up your neuroses and insecurity? Could he gather up your broken dreams?

Your failed relationships? And your painful loss? Could he take it all and redeem it all? Yes, he does it first by being in relationship with us.

When we look at this brief summary of Simeon's character, we find a man who is intimate with God. We get the impression that he spends most of his time at the temple.

His life is spent in worship of God. He would know the songs of the temple by heart. Those songs are in our Bible, they're called the Psalms. And so these words would regularly come from Simeon's lips.

[12 : 43] Like in Psalm 19, Or something completely different, regularly from his lips.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? Or the psalm we prayed earlier, Psalm 84, that Kathy led us in.

How lovely is your dwelling place. O Lord of hosts, my soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.

The range of emotions and postures that we find in the Psalms would have opened up Simeon to honestly express himself to God. Not to role play before him, but to be himself.

That's intimacy, right? I mean, intimacy isn't a formula. It's probably something different than we've been taught as evangelicals.

[13 : 52] Who's ever been taught to pray with the formula X? You go through adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. That's how you should pray, right?

You've done that? Me too. And I think it's trained us to not actually tell God what we're really thinking and really believing. That's, I mean, it's helpful, but it's not intimacy.

Like, man, you really don't want a formula for talking to your spouse, your wife, your girlfriend. I'll give you a formula.

It will not go for well, I promise. That's not intimacy. We find God responding in kind, intimately.

Simeon was sensitive to the voice of God so that he understood the Spirit speaking to him, promising him that he would meet the great rescuer before he died. He was sensitive to the voice of the Spirit so that he would recognize Jesus when he was brought into the temple.

[14 : 54] Intimacy with God has implications for both the Christian and the skeptic. Now, if you're a skeptic of Christianity, it may be because you've regarded Christianity as a set of propositions to either accept or to discard.

Or perhaps you've looked at the church and you've thought there's no way I can accept a religion that's represented by these people. These people are crazy. And they're hypocrites.

And they're really hypocrites. And I get that. And I find my own faith challenged by these same things too. Particularly my own hypocrisy. But this is not how Christianity presents itself, primarily. Not as a set of propositions or principles. If we say we can have intimacy with God, that presupposes that Christ is a person.

That sounds like really hyper basic. And a bit silly that Christ is a person. Yes. But you can't have intimacy with principles and propositions.

[16:06] Okay? At the core of Christianity is a person. It's this person, Jesus. And he merits investigation. And let me say, you might not like everything you encounter.

Now, in doing so, I think that would somewhat evidence that he could be a real person. If Jesus was everything you think he should be, then he's probably just a projection of yourself onto someone or something.

Right? Also, in saying that you might not like everything you encounter either. You, yeah, a lot of folks in his day didn't like Jesus either.

Simeon predicted as much. He said that this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel. That thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. Just two chapters later, we find Jesus in his hometown.

And the people in his hometown take him up to a cliff and want to throw him off. They try and throw him off. They don't succeed. But that's how he's received in his hometown. When you investigate Jesus as a person, you'll find that he makes some pretty bold claims.

[17:21] And you won't be able to say any more when you read those claims that he was just a good teacher or some kind of prophet. He claimed to be God.

He claimed to be the Lord. And as C.S. Lewis pointed out, you'll be left with three choices. To say that he was crazy or that he was a liar or that he was who he says he was.

That he really is Lord and God. Now, if you're interested in exploring deeper the claims of Jesus, Church of the Advent will be offering a class very soon called Alpha.

And it's designed to walk through these claims of Jesus about himself. Who was he? And we do this together. It's for skeptics and believers together. And we each talk honestly about these claims, the basics of Christianity.

And that will be offered soon. I highly recommend you participating in it or bringing a friend. If you're already a Christian, I'd like to point out an implication.

[18:21] That being in relationship. I'd like to point out that being in relationship to God as a person has an implication as well. That you, like Simeon, you don't need to play act when you come to him.

He's a real person. And he wants intimacy with you. Now, back in December, I mentioned I was talking to my spiritual director. He was encouraging me to be brutally honest with God.

Expressing to him my disappointments, my anger with him. And I found God responding by saying, finally, we can have some real honest conversation.

You've trusted me in a way you've never yet trusted me. So if you want intimacy with God, then do as David did in the Psalms.

Blurt it out. Blurt out to God what you're thinking. What you're feeling. Scrap the formulas. You can absolutely trust him.

[19:20] With everything you might possibly think and feel. He is always welcoming you. He was always wanting to be connected to you. And then you'll have a fearless relationship with God.

Everything you want to be and do will flow out of that. So we find that God binds up our broken fragments by being in relationship to us. He does it by representing us as well.

Luke includes some very specific details about Jesus' infancy. In verse 21, he was circumcised at the end of eight days. Just as God's law required in the Old Testament of newborns.

Mary came for purification at the end of 40 days. Just as the law required. As a firstborn son, Jesus was dedicated at the temple. God's law required firstborn sons to be ransomed.

Parents would pay a sum to redeem their firstborn children. Identifying with Israel who were rescued from Egypt. So here we find Jesus fulfilling God's law in every respect.

[20:25] Even as an infant. So that he, from start to finish, can represent us before the Father. We can't obey God's law perfectly.

So he does it for us. He unites us to himself. And when we stand before the Father, we have a perfect record of obedience to offer to him. Not our own, but Christ's given to us.

And our disobedience. And all the punishment it deserves. Jesus takes upon himself on the cross. We heard in Hebrews 4, which was read earlier.

It says that through death, Jesus might destroy the one who has the power of death. That is the devil. And deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect. So that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. To make propitiation for the sins of the people.

[21 : 28] He suffers for us. He dies for us. And it opens us up to this relationship with the Father. Jesus bleeds for us.

Not just on the cross. But as an eight-day-old infant, there was a high cost. From the very beginning, from the day he was born to the day he died, Jesus lived, suffered, and obeyed for us. This is the love that Christ has for us. Because we have intimacy with God, and because we are united to him, our stories intertwine with his, and we are made whole.

He is the main actor, and his own glory is the main plot. And as actors in this story, we find our desires moving towards him. We find ourselves wanting him more than anything else.

So now what? What's next? Well, we now enter into his vocation. We share his calling. Simeon's song in verse 31 says that God's salvation is for all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

[22 : 45] Now, with Christ, we enter into people's suffering. We bear one another's burdens. We invite them into an intimate relationship with the Father.

Like Anna the prophetess in verse 38. We give thanks to God and speak of Jesus to all who are waiting for their stories to be made whole.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. And the Father, and of the Lord, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.