

Waiting for Consolation

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me say welcome to you all and Merry Christmas.

This is our final Christmas Sunday, and because of that, we're going to be singing Christmas carols. We're going to be focusing on Christmas themes.

And these themes are wonderful because the more you understand about Christmas, the more you understand about Christianity as a whole. And this morning, we're going to be looking at this passage that I think often gets overlooked when we're telling the Christmas story, when we're thinking about the Christmas story.

It's this encounter that happens at the temple at some point in Jesus' childhood when His parents bring Him to present Him and dedicate Him. And we see one of the world's first Christmas carols. It's uttered by Simeon, this old prophet who's at the temple who has the honor of meeting Jesus face to face. And as we look at this, as I said a moment ago, what I hope becomes clear is that as we understand the meaning of Christmas that we see embedded in this Christmas carol, we're going to begin to understand more clearly the meaning of the Christian faith, why it offers hope unlike anything else we will find.

[1 : 27] This story, this encounter breaks down into four parts and each tells us something vital about Christmas and the Christian gospel. A spiritual longing, a salvation for all, a sign opposed, and a sword that pierces.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for the freedom to gather together and worship Your name. We know that the world, there's so much uncertainty right now in the world, so much anxiety.

We know that there are people who maybe wanted to be here but are fearful of COVID, and there are lots of people whose plans got disrupted because of these things.

And Lord, this is a time of unrest, and I pray that, Lord, You in this time would minister and speak to us in ways that we need to hear. Some of us are here this morning just longing for comfort.

Some of us are here and we're angry and we're frustrated or we feel alone, we feel isolated. Lord, whatever our needs are, whatever we're feeling this morning, I pray that You would speak through Your Word to us in ways that we need to hear.

[2 : 33] We need to hear from our Heavenly Father this morning. We pray this, Lord, for our good and the power of Your Spirit and for Your glory. Amen. So first of all, a spiritual longing.

Luke 2 is about, this passage in Luke 2 is a place where we meet two very important people in the Christmas story. We meet Simeon and we meet Anna.

And they have a lot in common. They're both advanced in years. They're both very devout and they spend much of their time praying and fasting at the temple. And they are both doing the same thing. They're both waiting for the consolation of Israel. What does that mean? Well, the Jews at this time in history are living under Roman rule.

They're occupied. So while they have a certain amount of freedom, they're really overseen, dominated, controlled by Rome. And they had experienced a lot of suffering during this time.

[3 : 39] There had been attempts at uprisings that had been absolutely crushed. They're people who felt like all of the glory, all of the greatness of their nation was in the past.

And so they're waiting for God to do something. They're longing for God to come and sort of redeem them, bring them some kind of ultimate consolation. And many of them believed that the main thing they needed, the greatest consolation they could imagine, would be for God to overthrow Rome and restore them to their former glory.

So that's what a lot of people are waiting on. And God has given Simeon a crucial piece of information. We see this alluded to in verse 29.

Simeon has been told by God that he's never going to ultimately be able to find peace until he meets God's Savior. He's never going to ultimately be able to find peace until he meets God's Savior.

In other words, Simeon's deepest longing is not political. It's spiritual. His biggest problem is not political.

[4 : 55] It's spiritual. His longings, in other words, would never be ultimately satisfied by any kind of revolution. His deepest longings could only be satisfied by a relationship with God himself.

So he's waiting at the temple to meet God's salvation, a person who's coming. Now, why would this be the case? Why would his deepest longings, our deepest longings, be spiritual?

Why would it be true that we will never know peace, never know ultimate consolation until we have a relationship with God? Well, very few people have written more thoughtfully about this than St. Augustine.

He reasons it this way. He says, well, if we understand God rightly, then God is a trinity of persons. One God, three persons in perfect eternal relationship with one another.

Each person of the trinity is wholly other-centered. Wholly other-centered, right? And so within God's essence, there is relationship.

[6 : 04] So this is what it means when the Bible says that God is love. God's nature is loving relationship. And since we are made in the image of that God, we are made for the same thing.

We're made for that other-centered, loving relationship with God. And so Augustine reasons that without that, if we don't have that, then we end up turning inward.

We become cut off. We become spiritually isolated. We become distorted. Much of the evil in the world flows out of that turning inward.

And Augustine says that we're actually less than human if we are not in that relationship that we were made to have with God. And ultimately, he says, we're incomplete.

No matter what we do, we can't make ourselves whole because wholeness can only be found in relationship with God because that's why we were made. And so he says, you know, our lives are sort of pervaded by a kind of restlessness, a kind of discontent.

[7 : 18] And it sits underneath everything. And, you know, we deal with this restlessness and this discontent in different ways. There's a lot of things that we do to self-medicate.

Some of us do it by overeating. Some of us do it by drinking too much. Some of us do it by shopping. We're probably all thinking about the last couple of weeks and thinking, check, check, check.

We do it by vegging out on devices. Some of us do it through pornography. There's lots of ways that we self-medicate to try to deal with this pervasive restlessness.

And, you know, a lot of these things bring momentary relief, but some of them are followed by a sense of hollowness and self-loathing. They don't make us whole.

They actually make us feel the opposite. They make us feel empty. Some of us sort of have more sophisticated ways of seeking consolation. Maybe we seek it in the affirmation of others.

[8 : 19] Maybe we seek it through getting attention from the opposite sex. Maybe we seek it simply through escape fantasies. You know, fantasizing about what it would be like to have a different life or a different family or live somewhere else or have a different job.

Some of us pour ourselves into our work and try to make ourselves whole that way. Some of us give ourselves to meaningful pursuits or social causes. You know, all of these are things that we do to try to create some semblance of wholeness.

But what we find is, and I think that you would agree, I've certainly found this to be the case, none of these things ever really leads to true lasting peace. They never really leave us feeling whole. A lot of times they leave us feeling empty, robbed, let down, disillusioned.

So the implication of this first point is this. Whatever you think your biggest need is, and man, with this year we've had, we could list a lot of valid things.

You know, we mentioned COVID and we think about the ongoing sort of political instability in a country adjusting to all that's happened in the world of politics over the last couple of years.

[9 : 26] And think about the racial reckoning that's happening in our society right now. And there are lots of things that we could point to and say, that's the biggest need we have. And they're all valid needs, don't get me wrong. But whatever we think our biggest need is, our biggest need is actually spiritual.

Right? So Israel thought their biggest need was for God to overthrow Rome. We might think of some of the things I listed. We might think, you know, I just really need to find someone to marry. I need to finally have kids. I need to feel safe and secure.

Maybe it's the approval of your parents. You know, you think, man, if I had that, then my life would be different. All valid needs, but the biggest need that we have is to be in relationship with God. That's the only thing that can make us whole. That's true consolation. And so this is why Christmas is such good news. If we move on to the second thing that we see in this passage, we see the promise of salvation for all.

Mary and Joseph bring Jesus as a child to the temple to present and dedicate him. They're simply following the law in that regard. And then they encounter Simeon.

[10:37] And here's what Simeon says upon meeting the child Jesus. Lord, now you're letting your servant depart in peace. Finally, according to your word, from my eyes have seen your salvation, that you've prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

You know, what's amazing here is that Simeon is realizing a few things here. He's realizing, number one, that Jesus is not merely God's consolation. He is God's salvation.

This isn't just about making people feel better. This isn't just about comfort amidst grief. This is an answer to suffering. God's salvation has come.

And notice he doesn't say, finally, this person knows how to gain salvation, and now he can tell us how to gain salvation. He says he is God's salvation. People are going to rise and fall, not depending on whether they implement this person's teachings, but on their relationship with him. People are going to rise and fall depending entirely on their relationship with Jesus, not having anything to do with what they've done, but whether or not they know him. And then he realizes that this isn't just for Israel, that Jesus offers true consolation for all people everywhere by saving them and bringing them back into relationship with the God who made them.

[12:06] So he realizes that the implications of this are profound. So Christmas is the good news that God has made a way for all people everywhere to be reconciled to himself by sending his son into the world.

That's what Christmas is all about. We say, well, great. What else is there? That sounds like the end, the climax. There's a problem, though. There's a problem that we need to deal with for this news to really become good news for us.

A sign opposed. Simeon goes on. The carol doesn't end. Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed.

So then we ask, well, if Jesus freely offers salvation to all people, Jew, Gentile, Democrat, Republican, rich, poor, if Jesus freely offers this to all people, then why would anybody oppose what he represents?

Why would anybody oppose this sign of God's salvation and consolation? And the answer is that the only way to be in relationship with Jesus is to give ourselves completely to him.

[13:25] Yes, there's the rub. Here's the problem. On the one hand, God's consolation, his answer to suffering, comes in the form of a person.

Jesus, who reconciles us to the God who made us. There's the wholeness that you're looking for. On the one hand, that's true. But on the other hand, in order to have that kind of relationship with Jesus that gives us peace, that makes us whole, we need to be willing to give ourselves fully to him. Which means, and here's the thing, giving up our independence, giving up our autonomy, giving up our sense of our ability to sort of determine our own course, to judge for ourselves right from wrong. We have to be willing to surrender ourselves to him and then depend on him and then follow him and ultimately to live for him. So here's the problem in a nutshell.

We have to choose autonomy or wholeness. Autonomy or wholeness.

[14:37] What's it going to be? If we want wholeness, we have to give up autonomy. We have to give ourselves to Jesus. When we do that, the gospel says we can begin to taste and experience the wholeness that we're meant to find in relationship with God because that's why he made us.

We begin to realize, oh, this is why I'm here. But we have to give up our autonomy. If you want to hold on to your autonomy, if you want to hold on to your autonomy, you have to give up any hope of ever finding wholeness.

You know, the benefit is we get to keep living as we please. We get to keep doing what we want. But with that comes restlessness. There's a kind of irony in that.

You can do whatever you want, but you'll never be satisfied. Isolation. And ultimately that sets us on the road to dehumanization and self-destruction.

Think about that list I gave us earlier. Think about how many of those things that we do and then we overdo and then we overdo a little more and they end up destroying us. They end up breaking down our relationships. They end up dehumanizing us.

[15 : 47] Because all of the other sources we turn to for consolation are ultimately going to eat us alive. Live long enough, you'll start to figure that out. Now some of us try to do both.

And I would absolutely put myself in that category as I look back over the last 20 years of my Christian life and I think about what my relationship with Jesus has been like. I realize that many times, I hate to admit it, but I probably try to have my cake and eat it too.

A little autonomy, a little wholeness. You know, so we say that we want to follow Jesus, but what we really mean is there are some parts of my life that I'm willing to give to you, but other parts I'm going to hold back for myself.

You know, we want the peace that Jesus offers, but we also love our autonomy. So we say, you know, I love you and I'll follow you, Jesus, when it comes to liberating the oppressed or bringing justice, but not when it comes to my love life.

That's for me. You know, we'll trust Jesus when it comes to our job and deciding what career path we're going to be on. We want vocational counseling that reflects our gifts and our wiring and our talents and all of those, our Enneagram and our Myers-Briggs and all of that.

[16 : 56] We want God to speak into that and tell us what to do with our lives, but not with our spending habits. That will hold back for ourselves, right? And this is why I think that there are so many of us Christians who have never really experienced peace or wholeness.

We hear people talk about it up front on stage. I've never sensed that. My experience of Christianity is a lot of guilt. It's a vague feeling that I'm not doing enough. It's a lot of emptiness and disillusionment.

I'm not even really sure what I believe anymore. I think part of that is because we've never really given ourselves fully to Jesus. We sort of lived all of our Christian lives trying to have a little bit of wholeness and a little bit of autonomy, and a little bit of wholeness and a little bit of autonomy.

And guess what? We don't have that option. It's one or the other. It's one or the other. That's why Jesus is a sign opposed. Right? That's why he's a sign opposed.

That's why he's always going to be opposed in this world. It is hard to imagine any culture anywhere at any point in history being more opposed to this idea than our own.

[18 : 04] Right? Because personal autonomy may be our highest sacred value. That's the thing that many of us prize above all else. And so the idea that a faith would say, you know, you can finally find that wholeness that you're looking for, but you have to give up all of your autonomy.

You have to give yourself fully and completely and unreservedly to the God who made you and to loving the people in the world that God made. And then you're going to find wholeness.

Many of us say, no, that runs against my wiring. And it does. Our culture says something very different. So we ask sort of, okay, well, you know, what hope is there?

If our hearts are hardwired against this idea and our culture is hardwired against this idea, where do we turn? And that leads us to the last word from Simeon on Jesus and Christmas.

He says, Jesus and the coming of Jesus is going to be a sword that pierces. A sword that pierces. What do you do if you're holding on to your autonomy and you're opposing the sign of Jesus because you can't imagine giving it up?

[19 : 17] You need your heart pierced. And in one sense, Simeon's talking about the impact of Jesus on all of us. He says that through Jesus, hearts are going to be pierced and the thoughts of many hearts are going to be revealed.

What's he talking about? Well, on our own, most of us don't really know that we need saving. You know, I talk about that restlessness and that discontent, but most of the time I don't think we're really consciously aware of that.

Most of us are actually pretty content in our lives. And that longing for consolation is only something that we experience every now and then. But then Jesus begins to work on your heart.

And the way you know that Jesus is working on your heart sometimes is that you become less satisfied with the things that used to satisfy you. You go to all your go-to coping strategies to deal with the restlessness, but they just don't really do it for you anymore.

They don't really satisfy like they used to. You know, food, drink, shopping, job, romance, vacations, they all kind of leave you feeling empty and you're more aware of that. Jesus is working on you.

[20 : 28] He's revealing the truth about your heart. And then, and here's the real kicker, you start to become less satisfied, not just with what you're doing in your life, but yourself. That's the real sign that Jesus is at work.

You begin to actually see the truth about yourself. You start to realize that you're not that good, omniscient, sort of compassionate, enlightened person that you like to think that you are, that you project.

You start to kind of see your own selfishness. You start to see your own pettiness. You are to, you know, you begin to see your sort of sense of overblown self-importance. And these things begin to kind of stand out to you.

And I think often Jesus uses the experience in our lives to reveal these things to us. You have an argument or a fight or you say something that you don't mean. Right? You have some major failure and you're kind of reflecting on that.

You're like, wow, I'm really not that good of a person. I'm actually pretty selfish. That's Jesus working on you, piercing your heart, exposing the truth about you to you. Right?

[21 : 31] And so this begins to happen. So in one sense, this Simeon's talking about Jesus and the work that he does in all of our hearts, but he's also saying a specific warning to Mary.

He says, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also. He's talking to her. Now, Simeon's a prophet. We know that God speaks to him. And you can imagine as Simeon is holding Jesus and looking at Jesus, you can imagine God allowing Simeon to begin to see the awful, wonderful truth about the peace of Christmas.

And here's that truth. The peace of Jesus does not come peacefully. The peace of Jesus does not come peacefully. You can imagine Simeon beginning to put the pieces together.

How can God offer salvation and consolation freely to people who would rather be their own gods than follow him? How do you save people like that?

How can Jesus possibly offer salvation to people who oppose him? How is Christmas possible? If God is looking at a world full of people who oppose everything that he represents, when the angels show up and announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds, why was their declaration one of peace and not a declaration of war on humanity?

[22 : 56] Why is Christmas about peace? And why isn't it a kind of heavenly D-Day where God finally brings what's coming? How is this?

And you can imagine Simeon putting all of this together, and he's looking at Mary's face and Joseph's face and looking that they're beaming at this child. And you can imagine him saying, how is all of this possible? Jesus is going to pierce the hearts of many.

But in the end, and here's the crushing realization, Jesus himself is going to be the one who's pierced. And that's the secret. How do you pierce the hearts of many, expose the truth about people's hearts, bring salvation to people who don't even want it?

Jesus is the one who's going to be pierced. Jesus is the one who's going to be pierced. Mary's great burden was not having to give birth to Jesus in a cattle stall.

It was having to watch Jesus die on a cross. You can't celebrate Christmas without understanding the looming and the shadows of that cattle stall.

[24 : 00] We see the cross. Such an experience for a mother would be like having your very soul run through. But this is where we see God's answer to this dilemma.

Because when that love enters your life, when you look at the cross, there's a point at which the love of the cross jumps off the page, as it were.

It ceases being theoretical, and it pierces your heart. You begin to see that there's nothing in the world that can compare to Jesus. You begin to realize that this kind of love is worth sacrificing everything for.

And that's when we begin to be willing to let go of our autonomy and begin to take our first cautious steps into wholeness. And what we need to understand is becoming a Christian isn't about taking a blind leap of faith.

It's not about making a kind of intellectual assent to something. Becoming a Christian is about having your heart pierced. It's about having your heart pierced. You know, N.T. Wright, the historian and Bible scholar, tells the story of a Roman Catholic archbishop.

[25 : 17] He was listening to this archbishop preaching a sermon one Sunday. And he says this archbishop told a story about three young boys who thought it was funny to come into the Catholic church and to come in the confessional booth and to confess all of these kind of wild, outlandish things, just to see what the priests would do.

And then they would laugh and they would run out. And they had done this a couple of times, and the priests started to catch on what was happening. And so the next time these boys ran in and started to make their outlandish confessions, they laughed.

And as they ran away, the priest jumped out. And two of them got away, but he got hold of a third. And he looked at that boy and he said, okay, you've made your confession. Now I'm going to give you a penance.

Here's your penance. You see that painting on the far end of the church of Jesus on the cross? I want you to go over and I want you to stand in front of that painting of Jesus, and I want you to look at Jesus hanging on the cross, and I want you to look at his face, and I want you to say this, you did all that for me, and I don't care.

And I want you to say it three times. He says, the boy says, okay, walks over, he stands in front of the painting, he looks up at it, he says, you did all this for me, and I don't care. And then he says it again, you did all of this for me, and I don't care.

[26 : 31] And then he says he couldn't get it out a third time. Because at that moment, that love began to seep in. His heart was pierced. Chokes up, eyes filled with tears.

And then the archbishop says, the reason I know this story is because I was that boy. And that's what set me on the course of coming into relationship with God. Changed my life forever.

His heart was pierced. You can hear this stuff a thousand times, ten thousand times, but at some point, through the work of God in your life, this love pierces your heart.

It pierces your heart. And only then do you begin to see the truth about the autonomy that we so desperately crave. That it is a worthless illusion.

It is a worthless illusion. Having your heart pierced is painful, but it is also wonderful. Because that's what leads to true repentance. And repentance is really the only way we can begin to access that peace, and that rest, and that satisfaction that Jesus offers.

[27 : 42] You know, because repentance is really just about admitting the truth about ourselves to God, admitting that our hearts are hopelessly selfish and turned inward, and that our only hope is the cross.

But here's the thing. When you experience mercy, you begin to realize why people who have been Christians for a very long time love to repent. Repentance isn't just something that we do once. What you begin to learn is, man, I love repenting, because then I get to access and experience more of God's grace and more of God's mercy pouring into my life. And then you begin to taste wholeness. And then you begin to feel peace.

There's a sense of peace that comes after confession and absolution that is indescribable, that you just have to experience. But that's just a taste of what's on offer.

And what you begin to realize is that repentance becomes a lifestyle because it's the way that we access God's grace and wholeness. And that's where we begin to find peace and rest and relief from this perpetual longing for consolation.

[28 : 49] And the more we experience God's grace, the more we learn the truth that a God who is willing to take on flesh and then to suffer and die, a God who's willing to give His life for you, is the kind of God that you can give your life to and trust that it's going to be in very good hands.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that just as we just said, that there's more here going on than words and ideas, that there's a living, active God who's at work.

And I pray this morning that You would be at work in us in all of the ways that we need, that You would comfort those who need to be comforted, who are mourning, but that You would pierce the hearts of those who are complacent, who need to be stirred up.

And we pray that in all of us, You would give us that sense of peace that is not only a promise, but a guarantee for those who walk with You, Lord. We pray this in Your Son's holy name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.