

Simeon's Song

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[0:00] Well, I wonder how your Christmas was. I hope it was good. But I wonder if you've also noticed that Christmas is one of those times of the year! where there's both great comfort, but also a bit of discomfort.

For example, there's the comfort of great food, and then the discomfort of eating too much. Or was that just me? Maybe it was just me. The comfort of Boxing Day sales, but then the discomfort of having to fight the crowds and find a car parking spot.

The comfort of giving great presents, but the discomfort of having to pay for them. Or the comfort of spending time with family, or the discomfort of spending time with family.

You know what I mean. Or the comfort of holidays, or the discomfort of having to go back to work. Christmas is one of those times of the year where there's both comfort and discomfort, and we'll see that with Simeon's song today.

As most of you know, this Christmas season we've been looking at the songs of Christmas. People who sang in the Bible that first Christmas. And we looked at Mary's song, Zechariah's song.

[1:11] Last Sunday, the early church song. On Christmas Day, the angel song. And today, we finish it up with Simeon's song. But before we get to the comfort and discomfort of his song, Luke, who's writing our account, sets a scene full of anticipation.

And to really understand it, we'll have to do a bit of background work to see it. So, point one, verse 22 to 24. Here we see that Joseph and Mary are pious people, because they're obeying the law of Moses, aren't they, in the Old Testament?

And this law required two purification rites. The first is in verse 23, which talks about consecrating the firstborn son to God. And this was really a reminder of God's salvation for them from Egypt.

And so here's where we have to do a bit of background work. You might remember they were slaves in Egypt, but then God sent plagues to force Pharaoh to let his people go. Can anyone remember how many plagues rhymes with hen?

Ten, yep, well done. And the tenth plague was the death of every firstborn male. But God saved the firstborn of Israel by providing a substitute lamb.

[2:49] And remember, you've seen this before, they painted the blood of the lamb on their door frames. So when the angel of judgment saw it, it would pass over that house of Israel, which is where we get the Passover festival from.

But because of this, it was like God had bought all the firstborn males, both animal and human, with the blood of the lamb. And so they now belonged to him.

At the time, back then, Moses actually said to Israel, That was non-negotiable.

And they could not break those necks. And the book of Numbers tells us that the way to redeem the firstborn sons was with five shekels of silver paid to God at the temple.

Now, is this because my firstborn son, Timothy, is only worth five shekels of silver? No, he's worth six. No, I'm joking. He's worth a whole lot more, right?

[4:12] And so it's not really about a burdensome cost, but more of a reminder that God had saved them from Egypt.

And so the firstborn were his. In fact, the very next verse from that Exodus reading, Moses goes on to say, In the days to come when your son, who's having the five shekels paid for him, asks you, What does this mean?

Say to him, With a mighty hand, the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You see, the first purification law was about reminding Israel how God had bought them salvation in the past, which was particularly pertinent for Israel because they were waiting for God's salvation again in the present.

Remember, yes, they'd gone from Egypt to the promised land as God's people. Then they sinned, so they went back into exile, and now they're back in the land again. But they're not quite restored as God's people, are they?

After all, they are ruled by the Romans, not by God's appointed king. And they hadn't really heard from God in almost 400 years.

[5:22] No new word from God was given or written. And so they hadn't really been restored as God's people. But this first purification law reminded them of God's salvation in the past, which gave them hope that God would save them again in the future and restore them fully as his people.

It's a bit like Advent and Christmas, actually. We celebrate the Advent, which just means coming of Jesus into the world in the past at Christmas, which actually gives us hope he will come again in the future, on the last day.

That the past points to the future. But the second purification law is in verse 24. And it was about a sacrifice to make us clean before God.

You see, during childbirth, mothers like Mary often lost blood. It was just normal, which would make them ceremonially unclean before God.

There were things that made men ceremonially unclean too, so it's not a sexist thing. But with the men or women, this was a ceremonial thing, not a moral thing.

[6:32] And yet, the ceremonial reminded Israel of the moral. That we are all actually unclean before God because of our sin.

I mean, hands up here if you're perfect. No one? Exactly. No one is. We have all sinned at times by not always loving God or our neighbor, but putting ourselves before God or before our neighbor.

And so we all need a sacrifice to make us clean before God. And so these sacrifices were, again, not meant to be burdensome. In fact, the law even gave options if they were poor because they were more of a reminder that the sacrifice was needed to cleanse us before God.

And this law was also pertinent for Israel since they knew it was their sin that sent them to exile and their sin that still kept God from restoring them fully as his people.

And so Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel, the comfort of hearing that all their sins have now been paid for so they can again enjoy salvation and along with it, restoration as God's people.

[7:50] Verse 25. Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was on him.

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.

Simeon is another pious person, righteous and devout, we're told. And he's waiting for the consolation of Israel. The word consolation just means comfort.

It was the comfort God promised in our first reading. Do you remember? Where God said to Israel way back then, comfort, comfort my people. And why is there comfort?

Well, verse 2, because their sins have been paid for. And so now salvation from exile and restoration with God is possible.

[8 : 51] I should also point out that the idea of receiving double in that last line from Isaiah 40 is not about God punishing them double as much as though he's unfair.

Rather, the word double here in Hebrew refers to when you double over a cloth or like this piece of paper towel. And if you double it over exactly, one side matches the other.

And so the idea of doubling here really means their punishment for sin on one side matched their sin exactly on the other side. That's what the word double means here.

Of course, that was for their sin back then. But they continue to sin even now. And so verse 25, Simeon was waiting for that time when the exact or double payment for all their sin was made that he might hear again the comfort or consolation that all their sins have been paid for.

And so enjoy salvation and along with it, the restoration with God as his people. And all this would come through God's Messiah or King. Because you notice in verse 25, he's waiting for consolation.

[10 : 04] And then in verse 26, he's told he will not die until he sees consolation. No, he's told he won't die until he sees God's Messiah. The implication being God's Messiah or King will be the one to bring that comfort he's waiting for.

The comfort of hearing sins paid for, of hearing forgiveness and cleansing before God so that they can enjoy salvation and restoration with God.

And so this scene is really full of anticipation. It's a bit like Christmas lunch or dinner. I don't know if you experience this over the Christmas period. You know, you turn up to a place or maybe it was at your place.

For the Chinese, it'd be like Chinese New Year. You're turning up to lunch or dinner, Chinese New Year. And the table is full of all the fancy food, all the nice things you don't normally have, full of drink and decorations and Christmas napkins and all that sort of thing.

And you've got all the ingredients for a special dinner. And so it creates this sense of anticipation. And, you know, my wife's cooking in the kitchen and then the kids kind of eat it in five seconds flat.

[11 : 12] All these hours of work. Anyway, that aside, you've got all the ingredients for something special, which creates this sense of anticipation. And that's what we see in this scene. We've got all the ingredients for a special arrival.

You know, you've got pious people like Mary, Joseph, Simeon, people ready to be used by God. We've got these two purification rites that the law of Moses prescribed that reminded Israel of salvation that could come again and a sacrifice for cleansing to pay for their sin.

And you've got Simeon waiting for the comfort or consolation through God's Messiah. In fact, I don't know if you notice this, but you've actually also got the Holy Spirit mentioned three times in three verses.

You've got all the ingredients for something special to happen, which makes this scene full of anticipation. And then it does happen. Jesus arrives and so Simeon sings.

A point to, rest of verse 27, when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.

[12:33] As Simeon takes Jesus in his arms, he breaks into praise, doesn't he? Praise that is generally considered to be a song. And Simeon praises God for keeping his promise of letting him see his Messiah, which gives him peace in the face of death.

Because now, verse 30, his eyes have seen God's salvation. For as he looks down at Jesus, God's Messiah, he sees God's salvation because it was the Messiah who would bring it.

He would bring the comfort of sins paid for, salvation from judgment, restoration as God's people, which Simeon simply summarises in one word, salvation as a catcher for all it brings.

It's like when I sometimes pick up takeaway on a Sunday night after 5pm church for the kids. I'll be doing this tonight because it's the start of my holidays tomorrow. And when I walk through the door, my kids see me, they sing.

Well, actually, they kind of cheer. I'd like to think it's because they've missed me, but actually, it's because when they see me, they see their salvation. You know, their food, their drink, the restoration of their grumbling tummies.

[13:55] Well, when Simeon sees Jesus, he sees God's salvation, all that it brings. Sins paid for, saving from judgment, restoration with God. And so he sings.

But this salvation is not just for Israel, it's for all nations, verse 31. He goes on to say, This salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all nations. The phrase, in the sight of all nations, means all nations will see it.

They will see, or they can see God's salvation too. In fact, this part also echoes another prophecy from Isaiah, where Isaiah says that the Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations.

And same phrase, And all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God. In other words, Simeon is singing that all nations can experience the salvation that Jesus brings too.

But how will Jesus bring it? Well, as you know, by being that double or exact punishment for our sins.

[15:06] Making that exact payment for our sins. Remember, before Israel could enjoy salvation and restoration in exile, they had to have their sins paid for. That's what Jesus does.

In fact, three verses after this very verse on the screen is another passage in Isaiah, which speaks about a servant who will suffer for our sins. The famous bit is in Isaiah 53, where it says, But he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities, our sins. The punishment that brought us peace? Well, it was on him. And by his wounds we are healed or forgiven.

We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way. And the Lord has laid on him the sin of us all. You see, Jesus is not just the Messiah or King.

He's also the servant who paid for our sins. His death is the double payment which redeems us. His death was the sacrifice we needed to cleanse us.

[16:12] His death is what brings us forgiveness and cleansing before God so that we can enjoy salvation and restoration with God.

It's like that Christmas carol we just sang a moment ago, Come, O Long-Expected Jesus. And the second part says, Israel's strength and consolation. There it is.

This is what Simeon was singing about. Why is there comfort? Well, because Jesus was born to impart salvation to us. The desire of every nation, not just for Israel.

The joy of every longing heart. This salvation is for all nations. As Simeon said in verse 31 and repeats in verse 32. A light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.

I mean, lights reveal things, don't they? And so lights are a means of revelation, revealing things. Like when you turn on the lights at night and it reveals that cockroach scurrying across the kitchen floor.

[17:11] But Jesus reveals something much more. He's a light who reveals salvation to us who are Gentiles, that is non-Jews.

Shows us how to be saved from our sins judgment and see life with God instead. And for the Jews who already knew God at one level, this light is for their glory.

The glory of being restored as God's first people. As the Bible says, Jesus is first for the Jew and then for the Gentile. But only if they, like us, believe in him.

And if we do, we can know the comfort of Christmas, can't we? That Jesus was born to pay for our sins. That we might have forgiveness and cleansing before God. Enjoy salvation and restoration of life with God.

Of course, for us who already believe, we sometimes forget how comforting this is, don't we? Possibly because we've heard about Jesus and forgiveness so many times before.

[18:14] Or perhaps because we've forgotten how serious our sin is. But imagine if a bank decided to forgive your home loan debt. Or if you've already paid it off, refund your home loan debt.

Because they decided to pay for it. I did say imagine, right? It's never going to happen. But hearing that the bank would pay your debt would bring you tidings of comfort and joy, wouldn't it?

And yet our sin is greater, a greater debt than a home loan debt. Because it lands us in eternal judgment. And it costs Jesus a whole lot more to pay it.

And so we need to keep reflecting on the seriousness of sin and what it costs Christ. So that when we hear forgiveness, it will continue to cause us tidings of comfort and joy.

That's why it's good to confess our sins regularly. Both to remember the seriousness of sin, yes. But to keep enjoying hearing the comfort of forgiveness.

[19:19] Because Christ has paid for all our sins. Of course, we can also forget about the comfort of salvation and restoration with God too. And so it's worth reflecting on what God gives us as part of our life with him.

Like his presence to help us and reassure us. Ricky spoke about that at Christmas. That brings us comfort. Or the comfort of being part of God's family here and now.

Where family can care for one another and be cared for by each other. I know people who have helped members in our church with meals, with visits, with gardening, with money.

Two weeks ago, someone gave \$4,000 to help people at church in need. And of course, I know people who pray for one another. Does that not all bring us comfort too?

Or we have the certain hope of a world to come where whatever we suffer or miss out on this world will be more than made up for in the next. Some people in life have what's called FOMO.

[20:20] If you're a bit younger, you might have heard of this. If you're a bit older, maybe not. FOMO just means fear of missing out. And so they kind of work really hard to make sure they don't miss out on anything in life.

But as Christians, we are freed from FOMO. For whatever we miss out on in this life will be more than made up for in the next. Whatever we suffer in this life will be more than made up for in the next.

Like a friend who was like a cousin of mine growing up, James. He suffered a number of deformities when he was born and required a lot of surgeries. Now, he's done amazingly well.

He even won two gold medals last month at the Para World Cup for lawn bowls. But life hasn't been easy. And he's missed out on things and suffered more than his friends.

But now as a Christian, he has a certain hope of a world to come with a new body. A world that will more than make up for any suffering and loss in this life. That is comforting for him.

[21 : 21] Not to mention the peace we have in the face of death like Simeon had. Like some of our members have. Who despite their cancer have real peace and joy in the face of death.

I'm sure there's one person who many of us know well. And have seen her face beaming with peace and joy. Even though she's dying, literally, of cancer.

These are just a few things that God gives us as part of our salvation and restoration of life with him. And if we take time to reflect on them as I've just tried to do, we'll see again how comforting it all is.

We'll see why Simeon sings just after that very first Christmas and why we can sing after our Christmas too. But like Christmas, there's also some discomfort, which Simeon adds like a postscript to his song.

So more briefly, our point 3, verse 33. The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about Jesus. Then Simeon blessed them both and said to Mary, his mother, This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be exposed or revealed.

[22 : 38] And a sword will pierce your own soul too. Jesus, he says, will cause division. The rising and folly of many in Israel, depending on whether they believe in him or not.

And many in Israel will speak against him. We see it in the gospel accounts, don't we? But we also see it in our own world too. I mean, there are many who speak against Jesus today, like those who seek to remove our Christian heritage from our country, or who think the name of Jesus is only good to use as a swear word when they're frustrated.

And in our world, we see how Jesus will cause the rising and falling of many too, because you cannot sit on the fence when it comes to him. You can believe all sorts of things about Jesus.

You know, good teacher, nice guy. Yes, he existed in history. But you either believe he is the king who paid for your sin, or you don't. It's one or the other.

And depending on what we believe, it will reveal or expose the thoughts of our hearts towards him, which can be discomfiting. I mean, who here would be happy to have all the thoughts of our hearts exposed to everyone else in this room?

[23 : 56] Anyone? Nope. Of course, the solution here is to believe in Jesus and find comfort instead. The comfort of hearing sins are paid for.

The comfort of hearing forgiveness and cleansing. The comfort of enjoying salvation and restoration and all that it brings. And so do you? Do you believe in Jesus? And for us who do, Jesus can still expose or reveal our hearts too.

For how we continue to treat Jesus will reveal our hearts towards Jesus. Like it did with Mary. You might remember in Mark's Gospel how Mary went to take charge of Jesus because it seemed like he was embarrassing the family.

It seemed to reveal her heart that cared more about her family's reputation than trusting in Jesus. But what do our actions reveal about our hearts towards Jesus?

As we'll sing in our last hymn, Lord be my vision, is he the first in our heart? Put differently, is there anything you would not sacrifice for Jesus?

[25:05] You know, your time, your earthly comforts, your money, your reputation, your health, your children, your grandchildren. I remember a friend of mine, when he had a young family, became missionaries, and at first his parents were against it.

Because it meant they would see their grandchildren less regularly, or hardly ever actually. Which exposed what was most important in their hearts, family.

But they realised this and ended up supporting the son, at sacrificing seeing their grandchildren for the sake of Jesus. And for others, I know, particularly, as some amongst our 5pm folk, they've been rejected by their parents, or treated as worse than their siblings, because they've become the only Christian in the family.

And yet they're willing to put up with that, because Jesus is first in their hearts, even above family. Or at church, we have many retired people, and some have the money and mobility to go on lots of holidays, but they limit their holidays.

Not to save money, but so that they can do ministry at church, or help out around church, or care for others at church. Which is pretty amazing, really.

[26:22] Their actions expose who is first in their heart. It will look different for each of us, depending on our own situation, but how we treat Jesus, reveals our hearts towards Jesus.

whether he's first in our heart or not. And this can be discomforting, can't it? Of course, the solution to avoid this discomfort is to be like those people, and put him as first in our hearts.

To enjoy all the things God gives us, yes, but to do so with a clear conscience, that it won't compromise Christ as first in our heart. And so this new year, enjoy the comfort Simeon sung about.

Enjoy the comfort of hearing our sins are paid for. We have forgiveness and cleansing. Enjoy the comfort of our salvation, and life with God, and all that it brings. But let's also resolve this new year to keep Christ first in our lives, that it might show he remains first in our hearts.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you for Simeon's song. We thank you that it reminds us of the comfort we can have because of Jesus.

[27:37] The comfort of sins forgiven. The comfort of enjoying salvation and restoration with you as your people, and all that it brings. But help us this new year, we pray.

Amen. Amen.