

The Simeon Narrative

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[0 : 00] We're going to be reading in a moment from Luke's Gospel, Chapter 2, and from verse 22.

And if you're looking in the Pew Bible, that is on page 857. Have any of you ever awaited some particular event with great excitement?

If you have, I wonder how often the expectation and the reality match up. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it disappoints. Perhaps not that many of you are as big fans of the Star Wars franchise as I am, so you may find it a little hard to sympathize with the intense disappointment, bordering on feelings of betrayal that I had when watching the recent sequel trilogy.

But for me, having grown up at a time when Star Wars fandom was at its zenith, and having the expectation of what could have been something great, it was intensely frustrating to not have that expectation met.

On the other hand, I also distinctly remember when I was still in high school, the fifth installment of a popular video game series was due to be released.

[1 : 25] And it was due to be released on a weekday during term time. And while I wasn't overly invested in this, not being a particularly big video gamer at the time, my group of friends at high school were positively beside themselves with excitement.

Now, fortunately, none of them were sad enough to be the types who were camping out the night before in order to get the first coffee. Nor did they have the rebellious streak which would have caused them to skip school in order to go and get a coffee.

But we did run straight from school to the train to go up to Inverness from King Usy straight away. And I went with them because, you know, why not?

And quite honestly, I'm surprised they managed to sit so still as they did on the train journey because they were so excited they didn't stop talking about it the entire time. And the journey back, which is about half an hour back to Aviemore, must have been even more excruciating because they held in their hands something that they couldn't yet enjoy.

And you might imagine that such hype could never have been met in reality, but I can tell you that the look of joy on my best mate's face after an hour of playing Skyrim was the exact same look of joy on his face after a hundred hours of playing Skyrim.

[2 : 50] And, yeah, when the Messiah came, you know, there were many in Israel who ought to have been his most devout followers.

And they found him a disappointment because they were nothing like what they expected or wanted. And even many who were interested in him and his message to begin with soon fell away when their expectations were challenged.

But on the other hand, there were some in Israel who knew exactly what to expect from Jesus and found in him the complete fulfillment of all that they had expected.

One of those people was a man called Simeon. And we're going to be looking at him this morning. And so if you are there in chapter two of Luke, then we're going to read verse 22 to verse 35.

Now when the days of her purification, according... Oh, sorry. I apologize. I'm going to read from this one because I think that's a different version I have there.

[3 : 57] And when the titan came for their purification, according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. As it is written in the law of the Lord, every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.

And to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves for two young pigeons. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.

And this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel. And the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

And he came in the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 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.

[5 : 05] And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed and a sword will pierce through your own soul also so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.

Amen. I was thinking recently before coming to this that there are a few chapters in the Gospels and particularly the first two of Luke that tend to get assigned the position of the Christmas passages understandably.

But unfortunately I think sometimes that because you only have a few weeks to work with in the Advent period a lot of material has to get cut and I feel that Simeon is one of those moments from Luke that gets missed out.

And that's a shame because of all the faithful men in the Bible Simeon stands out for me as does his brief message to Jesus' parents.

And we're going to look this morning both at Simeon's faith and his message. Simeon in his day there wasn't anything unusual about awaiting the consolation of Israel as Simeon did.

[6 : 49] That is the Messiah. In fact it would have been unusual to find someone who did not await God's promised Messiah in Israel. But this expectation is not a measure of anybody's orthodoxy as the various reactions to Jesus during his earthly ministry would prove.

Not everyone had an expectation that came of true faith. That is one who understood which understood God's word in the prophets.

And Simeon stands apart from many because his expectation was one born of true understanding that came by the Holy Spirit.

The message he speaks over Jesus demonstrates this. He didn't expect a warrior who was going to cast off the yoke of the Gentile Roman occupiers. He didn't expect fires of judgment on the enemies of Israel.

Instead he saw the light of revelation to the Gentiles and the return of the glory of Israel. And from what information the Gospels provide us with it would suggest that the majority do not share Simeon's expectations.

[8 : 05] Even a lot of those who became faithful to Jesus appear to have had their expectations challenged as they follow him. Even the apostles. You may recall their question at the beginning of Acts as recorded by Luke when they asked, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

And I have to wonder if a devout man like Simeon surrounded by the hypocrisy and legalism of the Pharisees and Sadducees ever found himself crying out like Elijah only I am left Lord.

Or perhaps instead he lived contentedly knowing that God never leaves himself without a faithful remnant. Whatever the case though I think we must take the comfort from this passage which Bishop Ryle suggested in a previous age which is that God always has faithful people in his church no matter how despondent we may be about the apparent decline of faith in our village or town or nation.

God has promised that the gates of hell will never prevail against his people. And we ought to be encouraged that there are more faithful people like Simeon in every age than we may be inclined to imagine.

What a blessing it must have been for Simeon to have it revealed to him that he would see God's Messiah with his own eyes before he died. Now there's not many people who ever get given such insight into God's timing so specifically.

[9 : 50] Even so he wasn't given an exact time. For all we know the revelation could have been given right at the beginning of a long life now nearing its end.

So presumably he still had to exercise much of the same patience that we do in awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises. I was glancing over the introduction to a Brown's Bible the other day which was published in 1837.

Sorry. And the author had decided to include at the beginning a timeline of human history with reference to the church from Adam not quite up to the present day but beyond in fact and at each point where there was an important event he had comments on it.

Quite amusingly though this Bible published in 1837 was after his death he had two predictions for the future one of which was dated 1866 which I thought was very very specific and there he had a note where he said that he expected that Islam would be completely overthrown in the world by the year 1866.

The second date was 2900 which I don't think any of us are likely to live to see if he was wrong about that one too but this was where he expected I quote the beginning of the final battle between Gog and Magog since his 1866 prediction was slightly off I'm not going to be placing much faith in his prophetic abilities for the later date but it did highlight for me how eager we can be as humans to peer into the mind of God beyond what he has revealed to us to be more certain about future events than he has given us reason to be and it's a worthwhile reminder we have in the coming of Jesus as recorded in scripture that God does everything in his time and at just the right time.

[12 : 15] As Jesus said to his disciples in answer to the question about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel it is not for you to know the times or seasons which the father has put in his own authority not only was Simeon patient in his faith but he was content and we should commend to ourselves the contentedness of Simeon's faith because that faith was rewarded as he took the God man in his own hands and having looked upon a baby he's so certain that what he has witnessed is the salvation of the world that he can say with sincerity Lord you are now letting your servant depart in peace according to your word.

I don't know how many of the older generation here are into their football but pretend you are for a moment if you're not. Now imagine that you're on your deathbed during the year of the world cup and that you've been a staunch Scotland supporter on all your life and now you need to imagine that they have qualified for this world cup.

I know that's stretching out a little bit bear with me. Now I wonder if you would be able to depart the world in peace having complete confidence that Scotland would go on to win that world cup.

And I think of course the answer is no you couldn't because that would be utterly ridiculous. Even the idea of us qualifying for a world cup is ridiculous. Now even imagine that Scotland could go on to win that world cup.

Would you not want to live to see that triumph? Simeon I think must have seemed mad to some of the people at the temple that day.

[14 : 11] Imagine looking at a baby and proclaiming that here is salvation and here is the glory of Israel returned. And I admit I find myself in wonder at his faith because he was so ready to die having merely seen the baby Jesus without being allowed to follow his ministry to its completion and triumph.

And just as his four fathers Abraham and Isaac Jacob David just as they had believed the promise of salvation though they did not live to see it Simeon demonstrates this same faith because not having witnessed the cross or the resurrection and the ascension he nevertheless believes in Jesus as his only saviour.

How much more then ought we having witnessed in scripture the full work of Jesus and the sending of his Holy Spirit upon his people place our whole trust in him.

Having proclaimed the good news about Jesus in the temple having delivered his prophetic message to Mary Simeon completed his service to God and was able to say Lord you are letting your servant depart in peace knowing that his faith was not in vain.

Simeon and we're going to look now at the message that Simeon had both in his praise to God and in his words to Jesus mother and the first thing that we'll look at is how Simeon describes Jesus as the light of revelation to the Gentiles as I mentioned earlier many in Simeon's day probably did not share his understanding of what the Messiah was expected to do and perhaps the limited success of the Maccabean revolution nearly two centuries earlier along with its legacy and the regional ruler Herod can't have helped any inclination towards revolution among the Jews of the first century having come so close to throwing off oppressive rule once before perhaps it's no wonder that they were now expecting a figure of military and revolutionary might against Rome long years of being a people under foreign rule cannot have helped their attitude towards the Gentiles more widely either again perhaps no wonder then that they had ceased to see the Messiah as being for all peoples as their prophets like Isaiah had promised he would be but Simeon he had the insight given by the Holy

[17 : 04] Spirit and he knew who Jesus would be and who he had come to save he knew that salvation would come from Judah to all the world and he recognized in this infant the way that God was bringing that salvation and Jesus has indeed illumined the Gentile world and he continues to do so I wonder if you knew that the Bible is available in over 700 languages in its entirety the New Testament alone is available in over 1500 and that means roughly 80% of all the people on earth are able to hear the good news about Jesus Christ in their own language and what's truly incredible about that is not so much the sheer numbers involved though they are incredible is the fact that God was pleased to use ordinary frail infallible human beings like Peter and Paul

Irenaeus and Augustine Bernard John Charles Billy Nathan and indeed everybody who calls him Lord to take the gospel to every corner of the earth and to every people but more than that Jesus made it our duty to go forth and make disciples of all nations and if you're ever feeling inadequate to the task of spreading the good news then just remember that you're one more in a long line of people who are inadequate to the task that God set before them and yet God saw fit to use them anyway and he sees fit to use us anyway because he doesn't leave us to struggle alone towards inevitable failure because he's given to each of us the Holy Spirit as much as we need he provides in order to fulfill the purpose which God has set before us and we should be encouraged that while the light of the gospel seems to fade in our own land as people turn away from God serve other things in the majority of the world in particular Asia and South

America the church is growing rapidly day after day as people who once walked in darkness are brought into the light gone maybe are the days of countries needing Scots to go and share the good news with them that by the grace of God there are believers from any other countries who are coming to us as missionaries to help as we try to shine that light once more into this darkened land and thank God too for the many Americans who lecture at our own theological seminary because the next generation of free church ministers and many others will owe them much and we should take courage because the church in all lands still stands shoulder to shoulder for the cause of Christ that he may continue to bring that light of revelation to an unbelieving world and even when we are praying for the persecuted church around the world we should be thanking God that when his people are scattered as they were in

Jerusalem in AD 60 when it was besieged and as with the believers from Ukraine in our own day when they are scattered they bring his light wherever they go and God can turn the unlikeliest of circumstances to opportunities for the gospel to bring its light where there was once only darkness the second thing that Simeon describes Jesus as is the glory of your people Israel now when Simeon speaks these words he's standing in the temple in Jerusalem of course the house of God or perhaps what was supposed to be the house of God the temple that Simeon and Jesus parents are in is not the same one that Solomon built that was destroyed it was the temple built partly by

Ezra and Nehemiah and completed and made greater by Herod the Great in the 6th century BC now when Solomon's temple was completed and the ark was placed in the Holy of Holies the glory of the Lord visibly descended onto the temple and into the Holy of Holies as described in 1st Kings chapter 8 and this visible cloud was the physical manifestation of God's presence with his people Israel when the Israelites were carried off into exile as punishment for rejecting God and his law the prophet Ezekiel describes seeing the glory of the Lord departing from the temple I think since now in the church we have the Holy Spirit with us in our very person it's really incomprehensible the horror that the faithful

[22 : 32] Israelites must have had at the departing of God from them so viscerally and it must have been equally hard when they returned from exile and restored the temple when God's glory did not return and centuries later it would have needed a strong faith like Simeon's to believe that that glory would ever return at all but if the horror at the glory departing would have been incomprehensibly great then imagine the joy in Simeon's heart as he holds the baby Jesus in his hands and sees in him the return of God's glory to Israel imagine the wonder that he should be able not only to look upon the glory of God but to hold him in his hands so only the high priest was allowed access to the holy of holies where God's glory dwelt with Israel and then he was only allowed to go in once a year and then only after purifying himself yet here is God's glory returning to the temple in Jesus revealed to

Simeon who's given full access to it to him just as all who believe are given union with Christ and in him the glory of God and this too is a wonder because no longer would curtains and walls divide people from God's glory when Jesus died and the temple curtain tore full access to God in Christ became possible and not only for Israel but for the whole world and Simeon held in his hands the fulfillment of all God's promises for salvation friends if you are here this morning and you are not yet a believer then I must urge you to take hold of Christ by faith as Simeon did to accept him as Lord and Savior because it's the only way that you will ever see the glory of God and die in peace as Simeon did because that brings us to our final consideration from Simeon's message about who

Jesus was and what he was bringing not only was he a light of revelation to the Gentiles not only was he the returning glory of Israel but Simeon describes him the division which Christ brings in the world by Jesus himself during his ministry warns the twelve apostles as he sends them out to preach in the towns and villages surrounding Jerusalem concerning him that he did not come to bring peace on her he's come to bring a sword and the prophecy of Simeon to Mary is fulfilled daily from Jesus coming to this present day Jesus was immediately rejected even by those of his own family and his neighbors is not this Joseph's son whose parents we know they ask with contempt and even those who followed him eagerly to begin with are found turning away from him in John 6 because his teachings about himself became too hard for them to accept and after

Jesus' death as the church grew rapidly as Israelites came to Christ many knowing that they were accepting exile from their families and their communities and the same has been true ever since of many from other religions and in them are fulfilled Jesus' words in Matthew do not think that I came to bring peace on her I did not come to bring peace but a sword for I have come to set a man against his father a daughter against her mother and a daughter in law against her mother in law and a man's enemies will be those of his own household and not only in them but in any who face rejection and conflict from their friends and family because they've accepted Jesus as Lord the division which Jesus brings has been with us since the beginning of the world it's the reason that Cain hated Abel and killed him when Jesus came in the incarnation he made that division much much more visible and he brought it to everyone not as a possibility but as a necessity because we all stand here with a gulf before us with Christ on one side and the world on the other and the only way to be on the side with Christ is through faith in him and on the other side of that gulf is the shadow of death which sin casts over every human being ever born a curse which all will fall under if they do not come to

Christ who bore the penalty of that curse the darkness of that shadow is so dark that nobody can look across and see Christ by themselves brothers and sisters there is only one light which pierces that darkness and that is the light of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit working in people's lives and God has made us the messengers of that gospel to shine light into the darkness as Paul asks in Romans 10 how then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard and how shall they hear without a preacher and how shall they preach unless they are sent as it is written how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace who bring glad tidings of good things the division Christ brings is not only inevitable it is necessary and we must face the fact that we in the church are the only ones entrusted with the message which can bring people from the wrong side of that division and the bonds of sin to the side of

[28 : 55] Jesus who frees us from sin that we may be servants of righteousness to the glory of God