

Advent Bible Studies 1986 2

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[0 : 00] Verse 22 following, and that's on page 840 of the Red Bible, if you happen to have a red one. And I can't imagine what it is in the Blue Bible if you happen to have a blue one.

Luke chapter 2 and verse 22. Verse 55 in the Blue Bible.

And this is the passage, Luke 2.22. And when the time 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 that 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 or two young pigeons. Now, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.

[1 : 21] And this man was righteous and devout, looking 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 should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

And inspired by the Spirit, he came 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 lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word.

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.

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 set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against.

And the sword will pierce through your own soul also, and thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed. And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher.

[2 : 52] And she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till she was 84.

She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour, she gave thanks to God and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee to their own city, Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him.

Let's just pray for a moment. Father, in this noon hour today, we have these few minutes to look at this word from you.

And we know that it is your purpose by the Holy Spirit that this word should be a mirror to our own lives.

[4 : 09] That we'll see something of who we are by looking at this scripture. That it will be a window through which we can see something of who you are historically.

And it also can be that place where we, in all our need and all our longing and desire, come together with you in your need for us and longing that we should love you and trust you and renew our commitment to you.

So we ask that as we have these few moments together, you will by your Holy Spirit teach us these things from your word.

In Christ's name. Amen. Now, it's hard to go on with this passage simply because historically it's a very difficult passage because there's nothing that says this about...

There's nothing that says it about anywhere else in the New Testament. There's no reference to Simeon. If you put the judge at his desk sitting here...

[5 : 27] This is the judge up here, you see. And over here you have the person who is saying, my client is innocent.

And on this side you have somebody else saying, of the person that's sitting here in bondage, he is not innocent. In fact, he is guilty of the crimes that are alleged against him.

And this judge up here listens to this man say he's guilty. Sorry, he's innocent. And this man say he's guilty. And this man here may or may not know what he is.

But this man has to decide on the basis of what this man says and what this man says. And we have set up deliberately a kind of adversarial system whereby we try and arrive at the truth of what happens.

That's the way we do it. That's why the law courts work the way they do, is because they set up this adversarial system in order to arrive at the truth.

[6 : 36] Well, what happens with the New Testament is somewhat different. In that what you have is you have this sort of central event of all of history, the cross of Christ, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And to that you have what's known as the apostolic witness, which is really the New Testament, because the New Testament is the testimony.

And the apostolic witness is made up of primarily some, I mean, the earliest New Testament writings are Paul's epistles as far as we know.

But also, in addition to that, you have four somewhat controversial Gospels. Not controversial in one sense, but Matthew doesn't tell the same story.

This is Matthew here, and Luke here, and Mark here, and I've got to get that right. Is that right? That's wrong, isn't it?

[7 : 56] Yeah, I'm writing upside down and backwards. So that all of these are testifying to this event, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And the business that we have is to hear this testimony, to take particular attention to it, where there appears to be conflict, to hear what is new and unique evidence from one source or another, to weigh that in our own minds and hearts, to try and give balance to what John says and what Mark says and what Luke says and what Matthew says, and to try and come to some conclusion of what actually happened.

And the conclusion that we come to really is, in a sense, a conclusion about the person of Jesus Christ.

And that conclusion, you know, we've dealt with the question of, whom do men say that I am? John the Baptist's question, are you he that should come, or do we look for another?

And the whole question of, who is Jesus Christ? And nobody can give a final answer.

[9 : 23] You know, there isn't, there is an answer to that question in Matthew and an answer in Luke and an answer in Mark and an answer in John. All those answers are there. But the history of the community of believers, which is the Church of Jesus Christ, is that people, having heard this testimony, have been led to conclude either that just Jesus is an imposter or he is who he says he is.

And if he is who he says he is, then in some way he relates to us in a personal way. In other words, if you went back to this little picture here, which I will again present to your views since it's so good, if you go back here, this man arrives at the truth and pronounces it, he is the judge.

But this little fellow suffers the consequences of the truth, either by being set free or being taken out and hung by the neck until he is dead.

You know, that he has to suffer the consequences of the truth. Well, so in this similar way, when you hear the evidence and the evidence points to the person of Jesus Christ, then you live with the consequences of that.

If he is who he says he is, then you either have to defy him or to put your whole life's trust in him, to give your life to him.

[11 : 12] And that's something you have to do. You have to hear the evidence and come to a conclusion. Now, the particular, I mean, that may seem altogether too much background for what we're talking about, but the reason I give you all that background is because Simeon comes out of nowhere historically, is recorded in the gospel according to St. Luke, is obviously picked by St. Luke, that story, to illustrate some truths that people need to know.

And Luke obviously heard it. I mean, this is as far as the historical detectives that try and examine where this material comes from.

They point out that Luke accompanied Paul, that Paul was in prison in the Palestine area for two years towards the end of his ministry, that during that time, Paul spoke of Luke as being present with him.

And that Luke was, in the course of that two years, doing some research work to get the background material for the gospel that he was writing.

And in the course of that research work, it is thought, he went to Mary herself and talked to her. And she, because, if you remember, this of how it says of Mary in the part that we have already read, that she took these things and she pondered them in her heart.

[13:02] And when, some few years later, Luke comes along and says, what happened? How did it happen? She would then recount for him probably endless stories about what happened.

And among those stories, Luke, who is, in a sense, building a case because he wants to prove a point by what he writes, he selects certain of those stories and presents them.

And those stories are meant to so illuminate the person, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that people will come to believe in him.

So, you can see that behind this story of Simeon is the purpose of Luke to bring to faith in Jesus Christ the people to whom he's writing.

It's always helpful to remember, let me remind you again, the purpose for which Luke wrote. If you go right back to the beginning of the gospel again, let me just go over that with you.

[14:18] I think I did two weeks ago. But remember how he starts his gospel. Inasmuch, he writes, as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us.

You know, this was a popular undertaking. Just as they were delivered to us by those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, there was a living community among which this happened.

You know, we had a, I think some of you may remember because he used to come to these Nunar Bible studies, Stuart Gibson, who died just over a year ago and after a long battle with cancer.

Well, the story of his funeral here at the church was written up in the Reader's Digest in October last.

And I think we got either two or three calls from one of the sub-editors of the Reader's Digest in New York City to ascertain exactly how many people were in church for that service.

[15:40] And they weren't satisfied to take a guess. We had to produce some kind of documentary evidence that, in fact, there were this many people in church.

So, you know, that was the care they took to tell that story. And I don't think Luke would be any less careful in amassing the information that he wanted in order to do the thing that he purposed to do, that to get together from those who were there from the beginning and who were eyewitnesses and ministers and who had followed all things closely to allow Luke to write this orderly account for Theophilus with the intention, he says to Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

And knowing the truth, you will have to respond to it. That's why he's writing. That's the background. And that is, in a sense, part of the principle of selection.

And among the various stories that Mary would have shared with Luke when he was doing this primary research was this story of Simeon and Anna and the taking of Jesus up to the temple for the rites of purification when he was, and circumcision, when he was eight days old.

So you can see that Luke is being very careful and very deliberate. And you know that when you sit down to write in your diary at the end of the day the events of this, the 17th day of December 1986, that if you were, I mean, if you wanted to write in detail all the things that happened to you alone on this day, the people you met, the experiences you had, the thoughts that went through your mind, the weather as it was, the sort of things you learned.

[17:58] It would take you volumes to write one day's activity if you did it exhaustively. So that you, you know, if you do keep a diary, you probably can cover it in one small page and certain things stand out by which you would remember this day.

This day will be marked by one event. And even in recording that one event, that will serve in times to come to remind you of a whole lot of things that surrounded that event and that you will associate

in your mind with that event.

So Luke is highlighting this one event from the eighth day of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth to illustrate something very profound and very important.

And that's where we pick up the story of Joseph and Mary going up to the temple in Jerusalem. And I think I told you that in the Arab sheroot taxis, as they call them in Jerusalem, it just costs one dollar to go to Bethlehem.

That is that they pack the taxi to the door and charge everybody a dollar. So that's how close it is.

[19 : 19] It's not very far away. And so they travel up to Jerusalem to do what is spoken of in Exodus chapter 13, which is something you can look up if you like.

I don't think we'll take time to look at it because I want to go on and talk about Simeon. But in Exodus 13, 1 to 16, you have the story. You have laid down what's involved in this.

So they go up to the temple and the temple mountains so that you're, from anywhere around Jerusalem, you always go up to get there.

And when you get into Jerusalem, you go up further to the temple because it's on the pinnacle of Jerusalem. It's the highest point. And so they go up into the temple and they take this child for the right of circumcision and purification according to the law and ritual.

And it was, it really is a kind of, the purification part is something which has, in our feminist society, offended people that it's been carried on in what the prayer book calls the churching of women after the birth of a child when you have this, it's really when the woman, it really should be when the woman first comes to the church after having born a child.

[20 : 53] And it's a ritual cleansing. It doesn't, it doesn't imply moral failure or anything like that. It's a ritual cleansing.

And the, the churching of women has really, is really a thanksgiving after childbirth, you know, for the gift of a child. So that there is that sort of connection even in our own, in our own prayer book. Well, they go up for this and when they get to the temple and the temple has, had then as it has now, a huge area surrounding it, a courtyard kind of area because roofs aren't that important in that part of the world because there's not that much rain.

So you can spend a lot of time outside without much discomfort. So there they go up to the temple in Jerusalem and Simeon comes forward, an old man, righteous and devout and looking for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Well, the fact that he was a righteous and devout man means that he had a kind of healthy respect for God when he, he wanted to, to be obedient to God and to the law of God.

[22 : 12] When it says he was looking for the consolation of Israel, you may be helped by turning to the verse quoted in Luke chapter 1, verse 17, where it says, he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

That was the description of the consolation of Israel. what, what they looked forward to, the hearts of the fathers to their children, the disobedient to the wisdom of the just and, uh, to make ready for the Lord a people who are prepared to receive him.

And that's, uh, that's the longing that they had then, I suppose, the longing we have now that we might be a people whom God can very much bless.

I was having a discussion this morning with a young man in the congregation and it was very impressive to me to talk to him. And we were talking about last Sunday's sermon where Christ says he comes to give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf and those kinds of gifts.

But, uh, he says his experience of the world in which we live is that people don't want that. They are very careful to nurture their blindness so they don't see too much and they don't want anybody coming along and showing them what's there or taking the blinders off their eyes that they have very carefully affixed on their eyes so that they can't look at the things they want to see.

[24 : 01] That it wasn't universally an acceptable thing that, uh, that people wanted to see or wanted to hear. I just found that was a helpful insight and, of course, it's the same thing here, is that people very often fervently carry on their religious duties and responsibilities but they wouldn't thank you for, uh, for allowing those things to, uh, to bring into their lives all sorts of things that they don't want to deal with.

The turning the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just and, uh, preparing a people for the coming of the Lord. So, it is a mark of this man that he did want

to see, he did want to hear, he did want to walk, he did want all that God had for him and for his people and he was looking forward to that as opposed to others who were trying to protect themselves from it.

And so, this was who Simeon was, that he was, the Holy Spirit was upon him. It was in a, in a, in a prophetic sense because the, the prophets spoke as the Holy Spirit moved them in the Old Testament.

It was, uh, they recognized that they were saying things which were wiser than they were. I don't, I'm sure you've had that experience too when you've been, when you've made remarks that were really wiser than you are and you've been given understanding beyond, uh, beyond the knowledge that you have and, uh, in the community and fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

I think that very often happens. Well, it happened in a singular way for Simeon because he, he was at a moment in his life, perhaps the great moment in the whole of his life, the moment to which the whole of his life was just a prelude up to that moment.

[26 : 08] And that was that the thing he had looked for and the thing he had longed for and the thing he had prayed for and the thing he believed in suddenly had come, had, uh, you know, that, that, that verse that, uh, that, uh, comes in Malachi chapter 3 verse 1 which, uh, is a good verse just to remember where it says, um, behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. Well, everybody in the whole of the Hebrew, the nation of Israel and Judah knew that verse, the Lord will suddenly come to his temple, but when in fact literally and historically he did come, who was there to meet him?

An old man, a devout old man who recognized that in this peasant couple from Nazareth bringing their child for the right of purification that what nobody else even remotely conceived of was happening.

The Lord was coming suddenly to his temple and the old man Simeon goes up and receives the child and I guess that's because he was an old man and the parents probably respected him and knew that this would be a blessing to them and to their children if this old and godly man took this child into his hands.

And so you see the old man Simeon coming and taking this child into his hands and saying the nunc dimittis.

[28 : 10] I don't know if you have any great affection for the nunc dimittis but I used to be in a boys choir for years and years and years. It took me two years of choir practice to qualify to sing in it.

And it was in those good old days it was not uncommon to sing the Veneti the Te Diem and on occasion the something Omnia Opera what is it the Benediceti Omnia Opera the bless ye the Lord all ye works of the Lord bless ye the Lord verse after verse after verse and on and on and on now it's a wonderful hymn but when you are young and in a boys choir and it goes on and on and on so that somehow I always liked best the nunctum it is because it was short and you got through it quickly and it was one simple picture which can impress itself very much on your mind so there it was when the old man

Simeon takes the baby into his arms the baby Jesus into his arms and says Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace what I have lived for I have seen in accordance with your promise and having seen it my life is over there is nothing more to see there is there is no more and except to to depart this life and so he he prays that that having God having fulfilled his promise that he departs in peace according to that promise according to God's promise and he said the promise was that my eyes would see your salvation the salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all people a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people

Israel and you see it was part of Luke's understanding that this salvation was to be for the whole world it wasn't just for the Jews it was a light as he says a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory to the people of the Jews because among them and from among them comes the person of Jesus Christ and this person of Jesus Christ who comes from the long long wait of this nation of Israel is to be not only for Israel but for the whole world for the whole Gentile world now you see it's hard for us because as I say these words are so familiar to us and yet they are so absolutely revolutionary the world can never be the same in a sense once these words are spoken because Simeon recognizes that the purpose of God in the birth of Jesus Christ is for the whole world is for the salvation the healing of the whole world in this child a prophecy which Simeon makes and which

has yet to be fulfilled but which Luke believed and I think taught us to believe that this would go on and on and on and that it would never change that the fulfillment of world history would be somehow related to this infant that he took in his arms he saw that and he recognized it and understood it and so he said that's it I've seen it I've seen the glory of God and you know once the in the

[32 : 44] Old Testament you have a kind of terror of God the terror of seeing God face to face and people recognize that if you ever did you would die and that was a great threat so you try and avoid that and so Moses is hid in the cleft of the rock and sees God go by and so the idea of seeing God was that once that happens to you then there is nothing left of life that you will die well Simeon takes that up in another way saying that once you have seen that there is nothing more to see life is finished you are now part of a new world and that new world begins with that child and that's why becoming a Christian is a kind of life and death experience or more a death and life experience because you recognize that the old created order to which we are born and into which we are born suddenly is transformed by the beginning of a new creation in the person of

Jesus Christ and that you can't live any longer within the limits of the old creation you live by faith in the purpose of God revealed in Jesus Christ concerning the new creation the new heaven and the new earth and that something entirely new happens and old Simeon recognized that and put it into words that all of us are familiar with as words and need to be familiar with as the experience of encountering the person of Jesus Christ seeing the glory of God for the Jew and seeing the light that is going to be turned on for the whole Gentile world to understand who they are and what God's purpose is for them and so that's what Simeon saw and that's what he told them about and the father and mother marveled at what was said about him and

Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel for a sign that is spoken Lord will pierce through your own soul also and thoughts out of many hearts will be revealed that this isn't going to be easy for you to see how this happens and that there will be a falling and a rising of many in Israel well I haven't time to go into that now let me just leave you with one last word about the nunc demitis which has to do with two Greek words which are in it because they are unusual words and it's all contained in the phrase Lord now let us thy servant the

Lord that is spoken of there is not the usual word for Lord in the New Testament it is the root word for despot absolute tyrant who is in absolute control of his world and to whom Simeon recognized that he was a slave of that god and that he had been set in his life as a watchman to watch for the coming of the Lord to his temple and so so it's a there is a sense in which in which Simeon recognizes himself to have been a slave to a despotic master who gave him a particular thing that he must obey and he lived with that and when the child came to the temple Simeon was able to say I have obeyed and I acknowledged that this is what you called me to do and now it is done and it's a beautiful picture you may be offended by the word despot but there is another time that Luke uses it and I'll just I think I can show it to you I think it's in Acts 4 23 and this is after Peter had been in prison after the man who had been healed at the gate called beautiful and it says that they went and reported to he went and reported to the other Christians and if you look in verse 24 when the elders the Christian this infant Christian community or church when they heard what

[38 : 08] Peter said they lifted their voices together and said sovereign Lord and that sovereign Lord is the same word despot you know God whose will ultimately cannot be defied whose will will be done because he is sovereign Lord he is the ultimate despot who is in absolute control so it's a beautiful thing it's a beautiful picture and a beautiful story and if anybody wants to know how to receive the Christ at Christmas Simeon gives you a wonderful example of how you do it and what you recognize through him can I I was reminded of the of the calling for

St. Luke since we're looking at his testimony to the person of Christ so I'll conclude by reading to you the calling for St. Luke's day thanksgiving for what Luke passes on to us Almighty God who call us Luke the physician whose praise is in the gospel to be an evangelist and a physician of the soul may it please thee by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him all the diseases of our souls may be healed through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord Amen