

"God with Us"

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[0 : 0 0] All right. Well, Merry Christmas Eve. On a day like this, it's easy to get distracted with holiday arrangements and travel plans, food preparations, gift giving, and other things.

But as important as these things are, let's, for this moment, put them all aside and let's focus on Jesus and His Word together. Our passage this morning is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 22 through 33. You can find it on page 805 in your Pew Bible. And this passage is about Mary and Joseph presenting gifts to God in the temple, and then about their encounter with a devout man named Simeon. For you note-takers out there, this sermon is going to have three major points. First, we'll talk about how this passage proclaims the Gospel message, how it proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He has come into our world to redeem us and to rescue us from our sins by offering Himself for us on our behalf.

And while the first point will be about Jesus coming into this world to redeem us, the second point will be about how Jesus came into our world. It will be about the specific and remarkable way in which Jesus chose to enter into our creation. And the third point will be about how you can receive Jesus this Christmas. So, let's begin. Turn with me to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 22 through 34, 35.

And this is found on page 805 in your Pew Bible, like I said earlier. So, here we go. And when the time came for their purification, this is speaking about Mary and Joseph. 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 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, and 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 of the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.

[3 : 2 6] 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.

Let's pray. Father, we come before you and before your word. We thank you, Lord, that you have written this scripture for us, for our enlightenment, our illumination, for our rebuke and our encouragement, for giving us strength when we are weary. We pray now, God, put your Holy Spirit in this place in our hearts. Bubble up in us, Lord, so that we may draw near to you, that we may see you. Lord, we ask that we would, in this hour, come to know the fullness of the birth of Jesus, our Redeemer. And Lord, we ask this humbly, knowing we're not worthy for this, and we ask that you would make us worthy by washing us and purifying us before you.

Lord, open our ears to hear what the Spirit says through your word. And we pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus, Father. Amen. All right, church, this passage begins with Mary and Joseph coming to the temple in order to make some offerings to the Lord and to give gifts to God. And Luke quotes two Old Testament passages to explain what Mary and Joseph are doing as they make these offerings to God. It turns out that these Old Testament passages are important for understanding the birth of Jesus and the redemption that he worked for us on the cross. So what we're going to do today is look up these two Old Testament passages and see what they have to say. And this is great Bible reading practice. In your Bible reading time, whenever you see Scripture quoting other parts of Scripture, many of us often tend to just kind of skip over these things. But usually it's fruitful to take some time to look up those passages that are quoted, because everything in Scripture is there for a reason. And you will frequently find that there's a good reason that the New Testament is quoting the Old Testament or that the prophets are quoting Moses and so on.

Here in the Gospel of Luke, the evangelist quotes two different passages from the Old Testament to explain why Mary and Joseph at the birth of Jesus are making an offering to God at the temple.

So let's look each one up in turn. The first passage that Luke quotes is from Exodus, chapter 12, verses 11 through 15. And in this passage, we find that it takes place after God has rescued the people of Israel from slavery in the land of Egypt, and he has brought them into the land he has promised, the promised land, the land of the Canaanites. And the passage reads like this. These are God's instructions. He says, starting in verse 11, When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the Lord all the firstborn who opens the womb, all the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord's. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it, you shall break its neck. But every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.

[7 : 08] And when in time comes, your son asks you, what does this mean? You shall say to him, by a strong hand, the Lord brought us out of Egypt from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open up the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem. God is saying here in this passage that every firstborn of every creature in all of Israel, whether man or beast, was to be sacrificed to the Lord. And this is because, if you remember, God had passed over the firstborn of Israel during that first Passover in Egypt in order to redeem God's people from slavery. And in passing over the Israelites,

God spared the firstborn of Israel when he put to death all the firstborn of Egypt. And therefore, because God spared the firstborn of Israel from this punishment, God has a claim to the firstborn of Israel, whether man or beast. They belong to him because he spared them. And so God asked the Israelites to acknowledge this by offering up their firstborn to God as a sacrifice in order to remember that God had spared the firstborn of Israel when he redeemed all Israel from slavery.

But there is an exception to this rule in the law of Moses. Moses said that you were required to sacrifice every firstborn male from all creatures, except, of course, you were not required to sacrifice humans, only animals. If the firstborn we were speaking of is the firstborn son, then you were to redeem the boy instead. And we learn elsewhere in Scripture that redeeming the firstborn son meant you were to present the boy in the temple and make a donation as an offering, which was a substitute for the sacrifice of the firstborn son. In other words, in ancient Israel in the time of Jesus, at the birth of your firstborn son, you were to symbolically offer your son to God at the temple by giving a substitute donation in order to acknowledge that God had redeemed all of Israel from slavery and that he'd spared your firstborn son. Just to repeat, you were to give a substitute gift in lieu of sacrificing your son to God. Instead, you were to redeem your son by offering a gift to God. And this is what Mary and Joseph are doing with Jesus in the temple, in the

Gospel of Luke. Mary and Joseph have come to Jerusalem to present Jesus to God. They have come to redeem Jesus by offering up a gift as a substitution, as a representative token of their son in order to redeem him, in order to thank God for redeeming them from slavery. But notice what is going on here, church, in this special moment. When Mary and Joseph come to the temple, they are redeeming their son Jesus. They are redeeming the very one who would redeem all people from their sins. They are redeeming the very one who would set all people free from their sins and from death. In this moment, in this passage, Mary and Joseph are redeeming the Redeemer. And they are giving a gift to God to do so. They are symbolically carrying out the act of sacrificing their son without actually sacrificing their son. But of course, we know what they were only symbolically doing, God would actually do later when he would sacrifice his son Jesus in order to redeem us. You see what Luke is telling us here by quoting the Old Testament passage. He is telling us that long ago in the story of Passover, God foreshadowed to the Israelites that he would give his one and only son to redeem the world from slavery to sin. And God foreshadowed this by setting the children of Israel free from slavery in the land of Egypt and then by instructing the

Israelites to always remember how he had redeemed them from slavery by sacrificing the firstborn of all their creatures to God. However, as I said, God gave an exception whereby they were to redeem their firstborn sons by giving their firstborn sons to God instead. And like I've been saying, this permission to redeem their firstborn sons, it foreshadowed to Israel that true Redeemer, the true firstborn son of God who would come and would actually sacrifice himself.

[12 : 24] The firstborn son who by his sacrifice would set the people free not just from earthly slavery, but from spiritual slavery and from slavery to sin and slavery to death and slavery to the devil. And God would do this in order to usher his redeemed people into an eternal relationship with himself forever.

Here, friends, we have a true gospel moment. In this passage, in the Gospel of Luke, during this very first Christmas when Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph some days later have brought Jesus to Jerusalem to offer him to God and to redeem him with a gift, a donation to God in lieu of actually sacrificing him.

But now, in this moment, this gift that Luke describes Mary and Joseph as symbolically giving to God is foreshadowing the gift that has now actually arrived on that first Christmas.

Because though God did not require humans to sacrifice their firstborn sons, God himself was about to do this very thing with Jesus.

The Apostle Paul writes about this to the Romans. He says, For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do, by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

[13 : 56] And for sin he condemns sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

Friends, this is the gospel message. This is the good news of Christmas. We were unable to save ourselves. We were lost.

We were enslaved in darkness. We were shackled to sin. We could not free ourselves. But what we could not do, God did. By sending his one and only Son, Jesus, to be born into this world and to wipe away our sins on the cross.

And God promises to raise us up from the dead along with Jesus. Just as he raised Jesus from the dead, he will raise us up who believe and trust in him.

And all of this, friends, was foreshadowed and foretold by the giving of a gift that Mary and Joseph are offering in the passage we have before us.

[15 : 04] And so, I think, Christians, that at Christmas Eve, what better time is there to consider these things when you give and receive gifts this Christmas?

In your giving and your receiving, remember how at that first Christmas it was marked by Mary and Joseph giving a gift to God to remember how God had set them free from slavery.

To give a gift as a small token, a sampling, a representative, a foreshadowing, a symbol of that greatest gift that was actually being given in that moment.

The gift of Jesus, our Redeemer, the firstborn Son of God, whose birth we celebrate today and who came to offer himself on our behalf. Therefore, friends, this Christmas, as you give and receive gifts, think of this greatest gift of Jesus while you do so.

Well, friends, we've been talking about the first offering that Mary and Joseph made in the Gospel of Luke. But if we return to our passage in Luke, we see that Mary and Joseph make not just one offering to God, they make a second one also.

[16 : 21] They make an offering of two turtle doves. And last time we looked up an Old Testament passage about offerings, it proved fruitful. So let's do it again. Again, the second sacrifice that Mary and Joseph offer is described in the book of Leviticus, chapter 12, verses 6 through 8.

And it concerns the sacrifice that a mother was supposed to offer after she had given birth in order to purify herself. And this passage in Leviticus, chapter 12, it goes like this.

We'll start in verse 6.

Friends, according to the law of Moses, whenever a woman gave birth in Israel, she was to offer a lamb and then either a pigeon or a turtle dove for her cleansing.

But the law goes on to say that if she could not afford a lamb, then she could offer two turtle doves instead. This little detail is important because if we return to the Gospel of Luke, we see that Mary did not offer a lamb for the sacrifice.

[18 : 06] Instead, she offered two turtle doves, two small birds. What this means, friends, is that Mary and Joseph could not afford a lamb on that first Christmas.

This means that Mary and Joseph were poor. This means that on that first Christmas, Jesus, the Son of God, was born into poverty.

You see, friends, when Jesus came to be our Redeemer, He could have been born into a rich family or a powerful family.

He could have been born into one of great influence or of high education or of immense fame. But instead, Jesus saw fit to be born into a poor family.

He chose to count the poor as His family, not the rich. Consider this, friends.

[19 : 11] Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of the richest King in the universe. More than that, the Son of the One who created wealth itself.

When He entered this world, He decided to cast off His riches and become poor. Why? Why? Why did Jesus do this?

Paul the Apostle answers this question in his second letter to the Corinthians. He writes, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you, by His poverty, might become rich.

Why then? Did Jesus become poor? The Apostle Paul says that He became poor so that you, through His poverty, might become rich.

Scripture goes on to say that though Jesus was in the form of God, He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but He emptied Himself. He took on the form of a servant and He became human.

[20 : 28] And so, by Jesus emptying Himself of His riches, He was also filling you up with the riches of His grace, even the forgiveness of sins.

Friends, this is the redeeming act of Jesus. This is the gift of Jesus, this forsaking of His riches and His giving them to you, this redemption of Jesus. This is what began that first Christmas.

And so, I say to you, remember these things this Christmas, friends. Consider these things as you give and receive gifts. Remember not only that the greatest gift that has been given is Jesus Himself, but that this gift was so great it required Jesus becoming poor for you.

Meditate on this. Rejoice in this. Be assured of this. Turn from your sins because of this. Love God because of this. Preach the truth because of this.

Share the gospel because of this. Share that God has convicted the world of sin, but thanks be to God. He has sent His Son to redeem the world by emptying Himself of His riches and becoming poor in order to make you rich towards God.

[21 : 49] Amen, friends. We've covered two points thus far. I've spoken of how the gospel message, about how the gospel message describes God sending His one and only Son to redeem our world and how this was foreshadowed long ago in the Old Testament law with the giving of a gift at the birth of your firstborn son.

And secondly, I've spoken about how Jesus came into this world, about how He cast off riches for your sake to become poor so that you might become rich in God's mercy.

But if you're new to Christianity or if you do not know Jesus, you might be wondering, how can I know this Jesus who became poor for my sake? How can I draw near to this Son of God?

How can I embrace this good news? How can I be redeemed by Jesus and have my sins washed away? If we keep reading our passage, friends, you will find your answer in a man named Simeon.

Luke goes on to write that when Mary and Joseph went to the temple to make their two offerings to God, the evangelist says in verse 25, he says, Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout.

[23 : 07] He was 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. Let's pause for a moment here. Listen to what Luke says about this man Simeon. This is all we know of him.

Luke says that he was righteous, that he was devout, that he was waiting for the consolation of Israel. That means he was waiting for the promise of Israel's redemption.

Luke adds that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon. In fact, Luke mentions the Spirit of God three times in association with Simeon. He says that the Spirit was upon Simeon, that Simeon came to the temple in the Spirit, and that it had been revealed to him by the Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

And look what happens when Simeon is in the temple, when Mary and Joseph are there with Jesus. Luke writes in verse 27, And when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the law, Simeon took Jesus up in his arms, and he blessed God.

[24 : 18] And he said, Lord, now your servant is departing 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 of the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel.

Look at what Simeon says about Jesus. Isn't it beautiful? He says Jesus is the salvation of God, that Jesus has been prepared before the face of all peoples, that he is a light which will bring revelation to the Gentiles, that is, to all nations, to all people, and that Jesus is the glory of Israel.

And Simeon takes up Jesus, and he holds him close, and he utters all these words. And he says that he's holding in his arms the light of the world.

He says, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace. God had promised, told Simeon, that he would see the Christ before he died.

And Simeon received the gift which God had promised him, and so he rejoices. Simeon has received the gift of Jesus on that first Christmas.

[25 : 37] But friends, consider how Simeon received Jesus. God told Simeon that he would see the Christ before he died. And he did.

But let's probe a little deeper here. Let me ask you something. Does Simeon see Jesus walk into the temple and prove that he was the Christ by raising the dead? Does Simeon see Jesus work wonders to clearly demonstrate that he is the Christ?

Does Simeon see Jesus heal the sick? Does he hear Jesus speak in teachings more profound than anything Moses or the prophets or anyone else ever taught?

Does Simeon witness Jesus risen from the dead? Jesus did do all these things, and we can read about them today in the Gospels.

But Simeon doesn't see any of these things. All he sees is a baby being held in his mother's arms, and the Spirit tells Simeon, this one is the Messiah.

[26 : 45] This one is the Christ. And Simeon believes. So, friends, how did Simeon receive Jesus?

He received Jesus by believing that Jesus was the Christ. He received Jesus by believing in Jesus. And this is the same way that you can receive Jesus this Christmas, by believing that he is the Christ.

Just believe. All you have to do is believe. It's so simple. To paraphrase Spurgeon, anyone can believe. The rich man and the poor man can believe.

The prince and the pauper can believe. The sinner and saint can believe. The grandmother and the granddaughter can believe. Friends, 22 years ago, I was such a one.

There I was, walking in darkness, a slave to my sins, and God's Spirit spoke to me and pointed to Jesus and said, this one is the Christ. And I believed.

[27 : 50] And God poured out the riches of his grace into my heart. And you too, this Christmas, you also can believe that Jesus is the Christ.

And as you believe, you too will receive all the riches of his grace poured out for you, the redemption of your sins. Friends, this in fact is why the Gospels were written.

The Gospel of John says in chapter 20, verse 31, that this Gospel was, quote, written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Friends, if you're interested in these things, then I invite you this Christmas, take up the Bible. Read about Jesus. Read about his life in the four Gospels.

If you don't have a Bible, grab one from the pew, take it home, sit down, and read about that first Christmas in the Gospels of Matthew or Luke, and then keep right on reading.

[28 : 54] Read of the life and the teachings of Jesus. Read of his miracles, his healings, his acts of mercy, and keep on going and read of his death on the cross and his resurrection.

And then pray to God. Ask him, Lord, is this the Christ? And the Spirit will say to you, this one is the Christ, and he will open up your heart and believe.

But friends, if you do this, I have a word of warning for you. It is true that all you must do is believe, but this belief must be honest and from your heart.

You must turn from your sins and enter into Jesus' service. And as our passage goes on to say, you must be ready for God to expose your heart in order to purify you of sins as he calls you into his good service.

And the world will not like it when this happens. If we return to the final verses of our passage, verses 33 through 35, Simeon gives this warning to Mary.

[30 : 07] Luke writes, And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about Jesus. And Simeon blessed them, and he 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 the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.

Simeon has a word of wisdom for Mary. He blesses her and Joseph and he prophesies that Jesus will be appointed for the fall and rising of many, that Jesus would be a sign that is opposed by many and that the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed, perhaps like a sword piercing the soul.

Simeon here tells Mary and us, I think, that though we rejoice at Jesus' birth, there will be many who don't, who, there will be many who oppose Jesus, and though there will be many who rise because of Jesus, others will fall.

the thoughts of hearts will be revealed like the piercing of the soul with a sword. So, friends, this Christmas, like Simeon, let us rejoice at the birth of our Redeemer.

Let us, like Simeon, believe that he is the Christ. But let us also, like Simeon, take heed and let us count the cost of believing in Jesus.

[31 : 43] But, friends, though believing in Jesus has a cost, I promise you that any cost, no matter how great, is not worthy to be compared to knowing Jesus and the riches of his grace and the fullness of his life.

And this Christmas, if this cost is what is preventing you from believing that Jesus is the Christ and from following him, then here's what you do.

Ask God for help. Friends, we serve a gentle Savior. He longs to bear your burdens. And moreover, Scripture says that he delights in mercy.

So come to God. Say, Lord, this Christmas, I rejoice at the birth of your Son. I want to believe, but I fear my heart being exposed.

I fear opposition. I fear the world. Help me, Lord, by your Spirit. And God will hear your prayers and answer them. And he will fill you up with the riches of his grace.

[32 : 53] In fact, friends, let's close this sermon by praying for these things right now. Let's pray together. Oh, Father, we thank you that you gave your Son, Jesus.

We thank you for his birth. We rejoice, Lord, that that long prophesied coming came 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. Lord, we rejoice at this.

Lord, we pray that if there are those among us who are struggling in the faith, Lord, we ask that by your Holy Spirit you would point to Jesus and say, this one is the Christ and that they would believe.

Lord, we pray for those of us who already believe that you would strengthen our faith, that you would overflow us with joy. Lord, we pray that we would share this gospel with others and that for those who oppose Christ, for those who fall because of him, Lord, that you would not let us be fearful, that you would help us to respond to them in love and mercy and grace.

Lord, that you would give us good courage to follow you and to rejoice with joy unrestrained. Lord, we thank you for every single thing you have given us in Jesus and it is in his name that we pray.

[34 : 21] Amen.